

Can the Democratic Peace Permeate the Arab World?

The Dangers of Political Idealism

By Elizabeth L. Metraux

[Elizabeth L. Metraux wrote this piece in Fall 2004 before the recent elections in Afghanistan and Iraq and shortly after returning from the West Bank (Palestine) where in 2003 and 2004 she worked on human rights projects and lectured and taught at various schools and colleges there on a regular basis. Metraux has contributed to this journal in the past using her maiden name Elizabeth L. Saylor]

Forward

This piece was originally written before both the October 9, 2004 elections in Afghanistan, as well the January 30, 2005 elections held in Iraq. Though many policy makers and political optimists may hail these historic elections as a guarantee of sustainable democracy, I nevertheless defend the arguments set forth in this paper. It would be naïve to champion the success of democracy based solely upon the results of a few highly regulated elections. Democracy requires that ordinary citizens understand and are committed to the ideas of free expression, political tolerance, respect for competing ideas and preferences, willingness to participate in the political process, and an attitude towards government that distinguishes respect for the rule of law from blind and uncritical deference to those in authority. Let us not confuse these critical components of democracy with the ability to drop a name in ballot box, however commendable elections may be.

Introduction

When George W. Bush espouses the ideals of freedom and democracy as the cure-all prescription for achieving a lasting peace in this global community, one is reminded of the once lauded vision of Woodrow Wilson, whose idealistic aims of freedom, democracy, and self-determination gave fillip to every semi-ambitious nation around the world, hoping to hitch their dreams on Wilson's grandiose optimism. It took no more than a decade before it was apparent that what seemed novel in theory would erupt in savage warfare in countries spanning every region of the globe. Then Secretary of State Robert Lansing later noted in regards to Wilson's

vision, that it was “loaded with dynamite.” In Lansing's private diaries on December 30, 1918, he wrote that the promise of freedom and self-determination will

raise hopes that can never be realized. It will, I fear, cost thousands of lives. In the end, it is bound to be discredited, to be called the dream of an idealist who failed to realize the danger until it was too late to check those who attempt to put the principle into force. What a calamity that the phrase was ever uttered! What misery is will cause! Think of the feelings of the author when he counts the dead who died because he coined a phrase! A man who is leader of public thought should beware of intemperate or undigested declarations.¹

Apparently, historical precedent has been lost to the powers in command.

Today, the aim of a democratic peace is broadcast by the United States to the Arab Street, a people still recovering from socio-political and cultural imperialism imposed by the very powers that now claim to be the great liberators.² It is interesting that the Administration finds little irony in this, and likewise seems to react with bewilderment when Arab society rejects American attempts at imposing its version of freedom through democracy, and instead rallies around a call to jihad to oust the occupiers. Moreover, lack of understanding of the cultural, particularly religious, nuances of the people America hopes to liberate is equally disturbing, and will continue to manifest itself in offensive errors and misstatements of which the utterance of the "Crusades" is only the beginning.

Prospects for Democracy

In short, unrealistic, “one size fits all” democracy cannot simply be superimposed on states, Arab or otherwise, which are alien to the concept as a result of the breadth of idiosyncratic features of their society, for which we are all too ignorant. This may leave the observer wondering whether the democratic peace can be achieved at all when considering the many-layered, much-ignored, context within which Western-style democracy is aggressively being sown.

Though democracy has been the most effective institution in Western society for recognizing the widest sphere of individual liberty in many cases, it is not the case for every country at all times. When examining historical evidence, reviewing modern case studies, and exploring public opinion throughout Arab society, it seems that claims suggesting that the institution of democracy will genuinely liberalize society or dull ever-escalating Islamic

fundamentalism, are simply naïve and imprudent. Several areas of concern merit discussion. First, is the institution of democracy favored by Arabs? Second, is a Middle Eastern conversion to democracy desirable for the United States? And third, if not democracy, what reforms must be implemented to assuage the ubiquitous hostility and seemingly irreconcilable differences dividing the East and West?

For purposes of this paper, there are several necessary prefacing remarks. As the issue of Islam and Arabia are discussed, it is critical to recognize that the disinclination toward democracy and socio-political liberalism is not specifically a fault of the Islamic faith or symptomatic of the Arab identity. As aptly noted by Fareed Zakaria,

The real problem lies not in the Muslim world but in the Middle East. When you get to this region, you see in lurid color all the dysfunctions that people conjure up when they think of Islam today... This is the land of flag-burners, fiery mullahs, and suicide bombers... The Arab world is an important part of the world of Islam – its heartland. But it is only one part and, in numerical terms, a small one. Of the 1.2 billion Muslims in the world, only 260 million live in Arabia. People in the West often use the term "Islamic," "Middle Eastern," and "Arab" interchangeably. But they do not mean the same thing.³

When analyzing the incapacity for democracy to take hold in Arab countries, the concentration is on the Arab and Muslim constituencies of the Middle East, not the global Muslim population.

The data used in this research has been taken primarily from the Occupied Palestinian Territories, where public opinion polls and verifiable research are more easily acquired than in other Arab nations with high censorship and prohibition of public criticism relative to the government. Though Palestine is in many ways an exceptional case due to chronic conflict with Israel and its focal position in world affairs, it nonetheless provides a vivid representation of the dichotomy of Arab society, a population divided between those engaged with developed nations and seeking reforms within their own society, and those disenfranchised by violence, displaced by war, and generally dissatisfied by the status quo, subsequently sympathetic to a resurgence of extreme brands of Islamism which hardly bring about liberal democracy.

Lastly, in order to adequately engage in the discussion of the role of democracy in modern Arab society, the definition of democracy must first be clarified. As expressed by political scientist Robert Dahl, democracy is not a qualitative feature of a state, that is, a

condition a state either does or does not possess, but a quantitative characteristic based on gradations. Realizing that democracy consists of degrees, it must be founded on the most rudimentary requirements of the institution and then gradually developed to embrace more advanced political freedoms, including a public domain conducive to political discourse, transparency of government, etc., all preceded by the establishment of free, fair, and open elections. However, mere electoral democracy and genuinely liberal society are hardly the same, and the expectation that establishing the former will inevitably yield the latter is specious. It is important when analyzing this subject that we distinguish between the desire to establish basic democracy vis-à-vis elections, and the desire to achieve liberalization of society. Much of my analysis falls on this point, alleging that the U.S. administration has erroneously confused the two conditions, anticipating that democracy (political freedom), particularly in nations that have little precedent for liberal society and no social institutions that allow for the recognition of personal freedom, will instantaneously open society. This is simply not the case. Rather than championing a futile, even if well-intentioned, aim of aiding Arab countries in creation of some form of electoral processes (what we deem to be democracy), it is a far worthier aim to abandon the false hopes of transplanting democratic structures that will hardly achieve a lasting peace, and instead concentrate on engaging with Arab societies in efforts to develop meaningful initiatives to liberalize society by reforming social institutions that will lead to homegrown efforts at creating a distinctively Arab democracy, particularly in the realm of constitutional freedoms.

Democracy in the Arab World

There is no question that Arab nations have fallen well behind the international community in efforts over the last two decades towards opening society. Based on extensive research, Adrian Karatnycky has observed that

Since the early 1970s, when the "third wave" of democratization began, the Islamic world – and its Arab core in particular – has seen little significant improvement in political openness, respect for human rights, or transparency... In the 47 countries with an Islamic majority, only 11 (23%) have democratically elected governments, while 110 of the 145 non-Islamic states (76%) are electoral democracies. This means that a non-Islamic state is nearly three times more likely to be democratic than an Islamic state. Furthermore, none of the 16 Arab states is an electoral democracy.⁴

In regards to the institutions present in the 47 majority-Muslim societies, ten are presidential-parliamentary democracies, there is one parliamentary democracy, nine countries with authoritarian presidents, seven dominant-party states in which opposition parties are nominal, six presidential-parliamentary systems with authoritarian rule, nine traditional monarchies, and three one-party states.⁵

Furthermore, noting that it is not a necessary precondition for a government to be democratic in order to permit a high degree of liberalism in society, numbers pertaining to the extent in which freedom is enjoyed in Islamic society can be instructive. According to Freedom House reports, in the Islamic world, there is just one *Free* country, Mali, 18 are *Partly Free* and 28 are *Not Free*⁶. In contrast, among the non-Islamic countries, 85 are *Free*, 39 are *Partly Free*, and 21 are *Not Free*. Looking at macro trends toward liberalizing society in the last two decades, since 1981, the number of *Free* countries in the non-Islamic world has increased by 35, the number of *Partly Free* states has grown by 8, and the number of *Not Free* countries has declined by 21. Over this time span, the opposite has been the case in the Islamic world. The number of *Free* countries remained at one, the number of *Partly Free* countries declined by two, and quite remarkably, the number of *Not Free* countries increased by ten.⁷

To further contextualize the data in current world affairs, at the end of 2001, the world had reached its peak in the number and the proportion of electoral democracies, with 121 (63%) of the world's 192 countries qualifying as such, an increase of 55 over the space of 14 years, with an average of four countries moving into the category of "electoral democracy" each year. Furthermore, 86 countries are *Free*, where basic political rights and civil liberties are recognized. These countries are home to 2.5 billion people, or 41.5% of the global population. There are 57 *Partly Free* countries, where there is limited respect for political rights and civil liberties, significant corruption, weak rule of law, ethnic and religious strife, and single-party dominance. Of the global population, 36.4%, or 2.2 billion people, are living in the 49 *Not Free* countries, where basic political rights are absent and basic civil liberties are widely and systematically denied.⁸

As this concerns the Middle East (not including Northern Africa), it is in these 14 countries where the roots of democracy and freedom are the weakest, laying claim to only one *Free* country, Israel (and though located in the Near East region, could hardly be called Arab),

three Partly Free states, Jordan, Kuwait, and Turkey, and ten countries that are Not Free. Israel and Turkey are the region's only electoral democracies.⁹

Palestinian Attitudes Towards Democracy

Clearly, Arab leadership has rejected democracy and induction of any kind of liberal social infrastructure into the domestic scene. With above statistics as patent evidence in support of the claim that democracy has yet to take root in the Middle East, review of the trends on the state level can be narrowed to look at the individual level of analysis within the Occupied Palestinian Territories to determine whether individual citizens in Arab societies do, in fact, wish to ride the wave of democracy or are content with the outwardly suffocating status quo. It is this examination of public opinion among the Arab population, which further fortifies the argument against some idealistic, "end to history," a la democracy.

The first set of data presented below represents public opinion surveys conducted in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem in April 1999, seventeen months before the onset of the Al Aqsa Intifada, when hopes for a peace agreement held at least a modicum of promise. A total of 1,200 Palestinian adults were personally interviewed by the East Jerusalem-based non-governmental organization, Jerusalem Media and Communications Centre (JMCC), which has conducted regular opinion polls in Palestine since 1994, focusing primarily on Palestinian attitudes towards democracy. Statistics relative to demographics are listed in Table 1.¹⁰

Approximately half (52 percent) of the respondents were from the West Bank, 38 percent are from Gaza, and 10 percent from East Jerusalem. Almost all respondents (96 percent) considered themselves to be Sunni Islam, while four percent cited Christianity as their religious preference, consistent with the distribution of religion reported in surveys by other Palestinian research centers. The sample taken appears to closely mirror the Palestinian population.

The second set of data is taken from 2004 polling by the Palestinian Center for Research and Cultural Dialogue (PCRD), a non-governmental organization based in the West Bank town of Beit Sahour. Demographics for research are similar to those in the JMCC sample, again reflecting general population statistics for the Palestinian Territories.¹¹ What is particularly interesting in reviewing PCRD's data, is the unmistakable shift in public opinion away from democracy and towards stricter association with political Islam, as evidenced by support of

parties such as Hamas, greater skepticism of the West and its allies, and increased religiosity of the people.

For brevity's sake, full text and methodology for each survey will not be included, but the below responses to questions concerning democracy and the role of Islam provide an arresting sample of opinions from a range of Palestinians.

Table 1. Jerusalem Media and Communications Centre (1999)

Responses to Items Pertaining to Democracy and Democratic Governance

Country that is the best model for the Palestinian Authority

Democratic Country (Israel, United States, France, in that order)	23 %
Non-Democratic Country (Egypt, Jordan, other Arab states, in that order)	38
Don't Know/None	39

Non-Muslims should have the same legal rights as Muslims

Strongly Agree	41 %
Agree	37
Somewhat Disagree	16
Strongly Oppose	6

Democracy is compatible with Islamic law (shari'a)

Agree	60 %
Not Sure	16
Disagree	24

Ratings on Indices Pertaining to Islam

Personal Religiosity

Very Religious	39 %
Religious	23
Somewhat Religious	27
Not Religious	11

Attitudes toward Political Islam

Very Favorable	33 %
Somewhat Favorable	31
Somewhat Unfavorable	23
Very Unfavorable	13

Table 2. Palestinian Center for Research and Cultural Dialogue (2004)**Responses to Items Pertaining to Democracy and Democratic Governance**

56 %	Believe that democratic elections in Palestine will neither be impartial nor reflect Palestinian public opinion
85 %	Believe that extreme Palestinian factions should cease resistance fighting to formally become a political party and join the government
80 %	Believe the invasion of the West to the Arab world is part of a Western and Israeli conspiracy against the Arab and Muslim cultures
77 %	Support suicide attacks <i>in</i> Israel

Preferred political regime

Islamic state	59 %
Equality for all	19
Democratic state	12
Democracy with Islam as official religion	10

Support for political parties in a general election

Hamas	51 %
Fatah	27
Islamic Jihad, PFLP, DFLP (and other Islamic parties)	16
Other	6

Ratings on Indices Pertaining to Islam**Islamic Shari'a or secular Palestinian law**

Shari'a	58 %
Combination	33
Palestinian law	9

Personal Religiosity

Very Religious	79 %
Religious	17
Somewhat Religious	3
Not Religious	1
Believe religion is the most important thing in their life	97.0%

Even if some indicators in JMCC's research suggest that there is sentiment for embracing a degree of political freedom, as in the case of one out of four respondents in the first data set citing a democratic nation as the best model for the Palestinian state, there is far more significant,

and much more recent, evidence contending that popular support rallies behind continued restriction of political freedom in the name of Islam. Obviously, the data above demands investigation into reasons for, if not a blatant rejection, certainly a disturbing reluctance to progress towards freer society and an indication that proclivities towards embracing democracy will further wane. It furthermore raises concerns over the extent to which the United States Administration continues to claim that the democratization of the Middle East is a movement rooted in fertile ground, in which the population is desperately seeking release from social and political despotism. The ostensible facts suggest otherwise. Not only has Arab leadership continued to regress away from the path of democracy and constitutional liberalism, as evidenced by broad macro trends in the Middle East, but the population within these countries has mirrored the opinions of those in authority, displaying equal disdain for the advance of political and personal freedom.

Freedom and the Democracy Deficit

Many Middle Eastern scholars have cited a range of highly disputable explanations for the deficiency of democracy, all that defer accountability to an outside scapegoat.¹² Yet justifications that have been offered by Arab leaders for the lapse in democracy, fail to address the root causes for this absence, which ultimately rests on the individual will of the people to participate in government. This deficit demands an explanation far more profound than false claims of economic deprivation or shallow conspiracy theories alleging a worldwide Zionist plot (as four out of five recipients seem to think). To provide the underlying cause of the rejection of democracy, one must look to a critical issue often overlooked by most scholars, which has framed the Arab conception of the function of government – the misunderstanding of freedom. The role of government, whatever that is perceived to be, is directly correlated to personal conceptions of liberty. In other words, if an individual's concern with personal liberty is trumped by other social values which supersede their concern with maintaining a sphere of individual control, there is little desire to have a government responsive to their needs and respectful of that inviolable personal domain. Without comprehending the necessity for maintaining personal autonomy that can on no account be violated, there can be no sincere appreciation of the necessity for endorsing a government that will protect that sphere, thus no purpose for

democracy which serves to preserve personal choice and self-determination in political and social affairs.

To provide an abbreviated explanation of the misconception of liberty, one can look at two opposing notions of freedom, the positive view of the East and the negative perception of the West. Negative liberty, as expounded most comprehensively by Dr. Isaiah Berlin in his 1958 lecture at Oxford University entitled "Two Concepts of Liberty," encompasses a kind of freedom that protects citizens from interference or intrusion by any person or institution without their consent. One need only to examine the Bill of Rights and other founding documents, to realize that freedoms traditionally sought have been freedoms *from* – from encroachment on the right to free speech, religion, association, or press, or from intrusion into an individual's sphere of control. In other words, the Western measure of freedom is determined by the level of noninterference. "The wider the noninterference," Berlin states, "the wider the liberty." This is a natural byproduct of a developed society in which the population is educated, employed, and involved. For these people in the West, it is unreasonable for them to accept that the role of government is anything more than mere protection of their rights and freedoms. The relationship between the citizens and the government is constrained as a result of the inherent cynicism that the population feels towards an institution that competes for control. Conversely, in a country that desperately lacks fundamental necessities, such as education, employment opportunities, or transparent systems in which to be involved, there logically develops a need for a type of "positive" liberty. In this interpretation of liberty, the government does not exist to protect the already-recognized freedoms of the population, but to provide those freedoms, and thus support its citizens. Positive liberty dictates not what the government should refrain from doing, but the many things that the government must do in order to sustain the wellbeing of the population. Berlin, on this point, makes a convincing argument that "[f]reedom is not everyone's primary need... [for some,] clothes or medicine or education [come] before freedom."¹³ Subsequently, when freedom is measured by the government's role in providing, for example, clothes, medicine, or education, we can deduce that positive liberty would hold that the greater the interference into the lives of the people, the greater the liberty.

As per the leadership vis-à-vis the two concepts, again the clash of cultures is apparent. With regard to negative liberty of the West, the focus lies in the scope of authority as opposed to the actual source. Certainly the source matters, particularly when the conversation shifts from

liberty to democracy, but looking solely at liberty as an "end in itself," as Lord Acton noted, our concern is the scope it commands, not the person who commands. Again, turning now to Arab-Muslim society, the reverse is true. Because their brand of freedom requires a significant scope of authority (since there must be a sizeable, dominant institution in order to implement the many "freedoms" they demand), the level of interference plays an inconsequential role. It is not the scope, but the source of authority.

Islam and the State

There is also the concern over the inextricable relationship between religion and state, in which brief attention must be paid to the perception of freedom as defined by the Islamic faith and which necessarily plays a vital role in shaping perceptions of the function of the state, as data suggests. Whereas in modern Christendom, the stance on the interaction between the church and state has evolved (admittedly with a few considerable exceptions), into a model that we must "render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's," there is no such partition between the temporal and divine within the Islamic tradition. Caesar is God, and vice versa.¹⁴ In fact, the traditional Muslim ruler, the Caliph, is literally the messenger of God on earth. This codependency derives from classic Islam that served (whether or not originally intended to do so) as a cohesive tool to unite the Arab people. Islam is a religion that sanctioned and supported the state, which in turn propagated and sustained the religion. As astutely observed by the Ayatollah Khomeini, "Islam is politics or it is nothing at all."¹⁵

Furthermore, a religion is more a reflection of its followers than the reverse (since followers rarely abide strictly by the orthopraxy prescribed by a faith), which necessitates a review of how the followers of Islam have put the above principle into practice as regards the freedoms granted through the exercise of democracy. Arab scholar Fatema Mernissi notes that Muslims "do not so much have a fear of democracy as suffer from a lack of... the most important advances of recent centuries, especially tolerance as principle and practice." Within Islam, they lack the humanistic ideas that have been propagated by the West through secularism, ideas such as "freedom of thought, the sovereignty of the individual, the right to freedom of action and tolerance." She goes on to aptly regard freedom of thought as "demonized and identified with... rebellion and disorder."¹⁶

As the concern over freedom is central to the feasibility of democracy, attempting to define such an abstract word within the Arabic language is instructive. Simply put, the rallying cry for freedom used in many Arab nations, certainly Palestine, is an inaccurate use of the word as a translation for justice, equality, or other social values which trump their desire for liberty in its most direct form, that is, the freedom from intrusion (i.e. negative liberty). The reason for the skewed translation is found in the Arabic word for freedom, *huriyya*, in which the direct translation equates to disorder, used to describe the state of disorder during *jahiliyya*, the time of ignorance prior to the advent of Islam. Following this line of thought, disorder (freedom) is alleviated by imposing a system of strict justice. Moreover, in the traditional sense of justice, as the solution for the disorder of *jahiliyya*, justice is associated with the coming of the Prophet Muhammad, and therefore justice equals Islam. Islam becomes "the solution," or stated in other words, freedom is obedience or submission to Islam. This has resulted, in the case of Arab society, into voluntary acquiescence to dictatorial leadership which provides a temporal authority that mimics the eternal and omnipotent authority of God to whom Muslims must surrender in order to acquire freedom. Even in the unlikely chance that opportunities for electoral participation come to pass, because of this fundamental feature of Arab society, one could easily forecast the reinstatement of a preponderant government body.

Assuming that freedom and democracy are linked, it would be useful to analyze the understanding of democracy within the Arabic language, as well. Disturbingly, there is no distinctly Arabic word for democracy, so to define it through the filter of the East becomes a daunting challenge. When speaking of democracy, Arabs have borrowed the Greek word *dimuqratiyya*. And yet with the advent of the Crusades¹⁷, all study of things *al'ghareeb* (foreign) and of the Greek civilization were banned, including the language itself. Mernissi tackles this point by saying that "two Arabs talking about democracy speak to each other in Greek, all the while remembering that the Greek heritage has been forbidden to them on the pretext that it is foreign." With the recent memories of foreign occupation and imperialism, all of which were launched by nominally democratic nations, the prospect of embracing an institution that was responsible for the suffering of the Arab people appears to be counter to the welfare of the Arab population.

They feel their interest to be terribly threatened by that *dimuqratiyya*... they feel their survival [yet again] is in danger."
This is certainly manifest in the military attempt to force

democracy on the Arab people, which only further exacerbates the perception that their people are endangered by democracy. Better, so they believe, to revert back to an age of relative security in the golden age of Islam, than to attempt to reform their nation into one that will question and threaten their identity. For those standing on the edge of a cliff, progress is not a step forward, but a step back. Muslims do not think of [progress] in terms of a rupture with the past, but rather in terms of a renewed relation with the past... [it is] not progress, but... renaissance – thus, in terms of myth. In the majority of cases the Muslim approach, the approach of political and religious thinkers, was just the reverse of the principles implied by a correct understanding of Enlightenment thought.¹⁸

A Policy Doomed to Fail

If this is where we currently stand in terms of interpretations of freedom and progress, one must wonder why the United States has chosen to intervene to establish democracy within a cultural context alien to and resentful of the institution. British political philosopher John Stuart Mill wrote extensively on the relationship between varying conceptions of liberty and the government institutions best equipped to help a people recognize the greatest scope of freedom. Mill discussed the principles under which it is acceptable to intervene in cases where personal liberty was excessively curtailed in his "Few Words on Nonintervention," written in 1859. Mill notes, as succinctly restated by Michael Doyle, that "it would be a great mistake to export freedom to a foreign people that was not in a position to win it on its own. A people given freedom by a foreign intervention would not... be able to hold on to it [because] it is only by winning and holding on to freedom through local efforts that one acquires a true sense of its value. Moreover, it is only by winning freedom that one acquires the political capabilities to defend it." Let us assume, however, that a degree of freedom is able to take root after being received with even a small modicum of support from the local community. The concern becomes how this liberty will be sustained by the government erected to replace the former regime. Observed by Mill, because this newly formed authority did not achieve freedom on their own volition, they would be forced to take one of three actions,

They would (1) begin to rule as did previous government – that is, repress their opposition. The intervention would have done no good; it simply would have created another oppressive government. Or they would (2) simply collapse in an ensuing civil war. Intervention therefore, would have produced not freedom and

progress but a civil war with all its attendant violence. Or (3) the interveners would have to continue to send in foreign support. Rather than having set up a free government, one that reflected the participation of the citizens of the state, the intervention would have set up a puppet government, one that would reflect the wills and interests of the intervening, the truly sovereign state.¹⁹

The writing is on the wall. Should the U.S. maintain its policy of forcing freedom and democracy on nations around the globe in the hopes of securing a worldwide democratic peace, at the top of the list the Middle East, we will inevitably find ourselves confronted with one of the aforementioned conflicts on our hands, underscoring the concern over whether the initiative of installing democracy in arid terrain will yield a greater evil than the status quo (a violation of the principle of prudence, for which realists rightly regard as the chief, perhaps only, virtue governing international affairs).

Until the thinking of the Arab population can moderate or they are better able to reconcile secular modernization with Islamic doctrine, there is little hope of reforming the government. As of the current quagmire facing the U.S. Administration, though resignation from our efforts in the Middle East would yield irrevocable damage, there is much to be learned from the mistakes in foreign policy of the recent years, a far cry from the days of Jeanne Kirkpatrick's suggestion that America cooperate with iron fisted rulers as a principle of the lesser evils dilemma. Frankly, it would be wise to consent to her advice, coupled with aggressive education and aid campaigns, and most importantly, with economic development and the opening of free markets (i.e. globalization). This will create a powerful, mobile, self (not government) sufficient middle class, which will necessitate relaxation of work laws, exchange with the international community (dissolving the "us vs. them" complex that unduly alienates and vilifies the adversary, a problem for which both sides claim guilt), more sophisticated demands of the government, eventually leading to petition for political participation. But this is a process that must be homegrown, not a product that can be packaged and sold to the Arab world. Boasting an obstinacy that claims that our democracy is the only successful political system, will only result in further rejection of the West, amplified animosity, and irrepressible turmoil.

We cannot afford to subscribe to the combustible combination of Wilson's idealism and Bush's ignorance as the means to achieve global peace through democracy. Simply forcing elections is not the solution, "The proposition that democratic elections are an instant solution to the problems of all struggling societies is inappropriate. There are some societies so deformed

and brutalized by decades of repression and terror that the call for immediate elections could lead to the electoral victory of demagogic forces eager to impose their own new forms of tyranny,"²⁰ a kind of self-imposed "tyranny of the majority," for which Mill forewarned. Audra Grant states that, "If the democratic model... is to develop in new nations, it will require more than the formal institutions of democracy – universal suffrage, the political party, the elective legislature... A democratic form of participatory political system requires as well a political culture consistent with it... [of which] the norms and attitudes of ordinary citizens are subtler cultural components."²¹ Among these norms and attitudes are a commitment to freedom of expression, political tolerance, respect for competing ideas and preferences, political interest with a willingness to participate in the political process, and an attitude towards government that distinguishes respect for the rule of law from blind and uncritical deference to those in authority."²²

Amartya Sen provides a more concise summation of the requisite social elements needed that go beyond mere election of leadership: tolerance of different points of view, and encouragement of public discourse, neither of which exist in great latitude in the Arab world. "Democracy is not attained simply by making institutional changes or through elite level maneuvering. Its survival depends also on the values and beliefs of ordinary citizens."²³

Once the foundational elements are in place within the fabric of the society, then the proposition for aiding in the move to accept democracy can return to the table. Otherwise, it proves insightful yet again to return to the prophetic commentary by the Wilson Administration to presage the unenviable situation we may find ourselves confronting well beyond the foreseeable future. When Wilson's test for promoting self-determination and free and fair elections came to play during a violent Mexican Revolution which brought Victoriano Huerto to power, he decided to "help [Latin Americans] elect better leaders" by unseating Huerto and giving "the Mexicans a chance to try." Then ambassador to London, Walter Hines Page, was asked by Sir Edward Grey, British Foreign Secretary, about plans to intervene in Mexico.

Grey: "Suppose you have to intervene, what then?"

Page: "We'll make them vote and live by their decisions."

Grey: "But suppose they will not so live?"

Page: "We'll go in again."

Grey: "And keep this up for 200 years?"

Page: "Yes. The United States will be here in 200 years and it can continue to shoot men for that little space until they learn to vote and rule themselves."

It would not be startling for similar sentiments to echo in the halls of the White House, though shooting men until "they learn to vote" is obviously, needless to say, neither sensible nor sustainable. And yet should our policy remain unaltered, we may be faced with such a situation.

In November of 2003, President George W. Bush addressed the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington, D.C., paying focus to and providing justifications for the American policy of promoting democracy around the globe. He stated that "the advance of freedom leads to peace," in which he seems to offer no exception to what he obviously views as an absolute truism. He goes on to speak to the broader Middle East democracy deficit, and the Palestinian conflict in particular, stating that "the only path to independence and dignity and progress is the path of democracy," conveniently omitting the fact that late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat was the most democratically elected leader in the Arab street. But President Bush then condemns "the Palestinian leaders who block and undermine democratic reform, feed hatred and encourage violence... [as] the main obstacles to peace, and the success of the Palestinian people." Bush does not acknowledge that even in Palestine, the one society bearing some semblance of nominal democracy (despite a host of other imperative obstacles deserving of attention), has far from provided the social structure to provide meaning to democracy, or (of more weight for policy makers and diplomats), the democratic peace so vehemently sought. The President is correct to note that his "strategy requires... idealism," an idealism, however, that we cannot afford.²⁴

Conclusion

Ultimately, as with most clashes between people or cultures, the problem can be reduced to a conflict of ideas: the Arab East which is disinclined to rally around the wan promise of freedom and democracy (owing to the risk of sacrificing their stability and security, and for lack of understanding of the concept of freedom), and the West, eager to claim that freedom and democracy are the solutions to a plethora of deeply embedded divisions and conflicts. Subsequently, it is incumbent upon the United States, then, to engage with Arab society in meaningful dialogue to begin introducing beneficial changes (free markets, etc.) without undermining the religious and cultural bedrock idiosyncratic to the Muslim umma, not a counter-

productive show of military aggression to launch an imprudent policy of spreading the potent and dangerous promise of democracy to ill-suited nations. International politics and actions taken to preserve security and aid in nation-building to establish a stable balance of power and thus fortify our own defense in an anarchic and insecure world, often boils down to a decision of lesser evils. Better to work within the parameters provided by the sanctity of sovereignty, and respect the self-determination of a population within a state that chooses not to accept democratic structures, than to upset the international system and thus compromise our security (which we claim to be at war to protect). Recognizing the United States enjoys a peerless position as the hegemonic power in world affairs, we would be wise to establish a status quo that ensures our national interests are met and seeks only incremental advances towards peace and progress in countries around the globe, and override the poorly-advised and short-sighted policies of stamping our own brand of government on nations wary and uninterested in reform.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Karl Meyer, *The Dust of Empire: Race for Mastery in the Asian Heartland* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003) 4-5.
- ² By the early 20th century, virtually the entire Muslim world (with the exception of Turkey and Afghanistan), was under the foreign rule of France, Britain, Russia, and the Netherlands.
- ³ Fareed Zakaria, "Islam, Democracy, and Constitutional Liberalism" (*Political Science Quarterly*. Volume 119 Number 1. Spring 2004).
- ⁴ Adrian Karatnycky, "Muslim Countries and the Democracy Gap" (*Journal of Democracy*. 13.1. 2002), 103.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.
- ⁶ Classifications of societies as free, partly free, and not free are based on political, economic, and social indicators considered by Freedom House. These classifications are enumerated in Adrian Karatnycky's 2002 article in the *Journal of Democracy*.
- ⁷ Adrian Karatnycky, "Muslim Countries and the Democracy Gap" (*Journal of Democracy*. 13.1. 2002), 103.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.
- ¹⁰ Demographic statistics of respondents to polling conducted by the Jerusalem Media and Communications Centre:
1,200 Respondents
- | | | |
|-----------|--------------------|------|
| Gender | Male | 50 % |
| | Female | 50 |
| Age | 18-25 | 30 % |
| | 26-35 | 35 |
| | 36-45 | 17 |
| | 46-54 | 9 |
| | 54 + | 1 |
| Education | Elementary | 12 % |
| | Preparatory | 22 |
| | Secondary | 35 |
| | College | 29 |
| Income | Well above average | 3 % |
| | Above average | 9 |
| | Average | 21 |
| | Below average | 31 |
| | Far below average | 34 |
- ¹¹ Demographic statistics of respondents to polling conducted by the Palestinian Center for Research and Cultural Dialogue with 1,006 Respondents:
- | | | |
|--------|--------|------|
| Gender | Male | 51 % |
| | Female | 49 |
| Age | 18-25 | 49 % |
| | 26-35 | 35 |
| | 36-45 | 11 |
| | 46-54 | 5 |
- ¹² Accusations that the Arab-Israeli conflict is inhibiting the progress of democracy in the Middle East often tops the list, particularly in the Palestinian Territories, where socio-political and religious turmoil has reached a frightening crescendo. Though there is consensus that resolution must be reached, "Arab governments curb political participation, manipulate elections, and limit freedom of expression because they do not want their power challenged, not because tension with Israel requires draconian social controls" (Ottoway). It is true that the

credibility of the United States to promote democracy and serve as an unbiased broker in the peace process has suffered as a result of scant efforts to mediate an end to Israel's Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. However, despite scarce support for the U.S., the Arab-Israeli conflict does not discredit the institution of democracy. Rebuking Ariel Sharon for his perceived interference in Arab efforts to liberalize their domestic environment (though he can hardly be accused of promoting peace between Israel and Palestine), is a convenient, if unfounded, excuse.

Others fault the American "empire" for siphoning resources from the Arabian Peninsula, as if economic forces are the culprits of democracy. However, empirical evidence hardly supports this theory that economic deprivation results in systematic denial of freedom. It is important to understand that although this may provide a stimulus to submit to belligerent acts of rebellion or revolution, it is not for reasons of economic stagnation that democracy is curtailed and fundamentalism is born, even if modern-day apologists excuse acts of aggression as resultant from these conditions. In fact, profiles of individuals engaged in militancy would suggest that the opposite is true. It is the highly educated, socially mobile, and economically empowered that are most likely to rally to jihad and oppose any sincere embrace of democracy (except in so much as it provides the air of legitimacy through popular election of those seeking power, a case of "one person, one vote, one time"). Sayyid Qutb, Osama bin Laden, the Muhammad Attas and the Rantizis, are just a few examples of those individuals benefiting most from economic and social affluence who nonetheless reject Western democracy. Furthermore, their core support is found not in refugee camps (another common myth propagated by those endeavoring to blame the international community for violence and lack of freedom, instead of the perpetrators directly responsible), but on university campuses, again among the upper tier of the social hierarchy. For one example, the Muslim Brotherhood, precursor to Al Qaeda, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and many other fundamental organizations with strong government sponsorship, had (and still has) its primary breeding ground at Al Azhar University in Egypt, parent establishment to the Islamic University of Gaza, where much of the Palestinian resistance fighting is instigated. Again, it was not the hopeless refugees in Algeria, for example, that consolidated power and sought to remove the established leadership in 80s and 90s, but the educated, even if hitherto unemployed, that were responsible for the fundamentalism in Algeria. It is not in the slums that the Taliban was created, but in the religious madrasas, funded by the wealth of the Saudi royal family. In short, asserting the myth that the poor, uneducated, or destitute are responsible for constraints on political freedom fails to explain why the poor and uneducated in Arabia have yet to raise arms en masse against their governments. They are comfortable with the status quo and the stability it affords. If this logic were to hold true, the rise of militancy or rebellion would have centered in sub-Saharan Africa or South Asia, not in the Middle East, a location that has experienced one of the largest economic booms in the world in the last thirty years. In short, it is misleading to claim that any hope for Arab democracy is bleak because Arab wealth is scarce.

As argued cogently by Fareed Zakaria, though it is true that there exists a powerful economic dynamic to the crisis of democracy and illiberal society in the Middle East, "the problem is wealth, not poverty. Regimes that get rich through natural resources tend never to develop, modernize, or gain legitimacy." Zakaria calls this the problem of trust-fund states, resultant from the oil boom over the last few decades, coupled with economic aid packages provided to countries such as Egypt and Jordan. "Easy money means little economic or political modernization. The unearned income relieves the government of the need to tax its people – and in return provide something to them in the form of accountability, transparency, even representation... Middle Eastern regimes ask little of their people, and in return, give little to them." This also has the effect of making the "government rich enough to be repressive."

For a recent rebuttal of assertions by Middle Eastern leaders for the absence of freedom, it is worthwhile to read Marina Ottoway and Thomas Carothers' article appearing in the November/December edition of *Foreign Policy*, entitled "Middle East Democracy." For a more comprehensive look at the obstacles to democracy and liberalism in the Middle East, Fareed Zakaria provides an insightful analysis in an article entitled "Islam, Democracy, and Constitutional Liberalism," appearing in the spring 2004 edition of *Political Science Quarterly*.

¹³ Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" (In *Liberty and the Struggle for Freedom*. Elizabeth Saylor, ed. Jerusalem: Al Quds University, 2004), 107-130.

¹⁴ It is worth noting that one of the considerable differences between Christianity and Islam is the Muslim belief that no human can be perfect or "God-like," as the Christians espouse by their belief that Jesus was the son of God. So to make such a sweeping commentary is a bit misleading because Muslims do, in fact, recognize the fallibility of man. One of the central divisions between the Sunni and Shi'ite sects of Islam is the extent to which leadership and the lineage of the Prophet is fallible, or if direct descent from Muhammad's family or divine appointment to a position of power is a role that makes the Muslim leader immune from criticism. However, the current debates

notwithstanding, it is true both in Islamic doctrine and certainly in practice that a leader's power is to be accepted as the undisputed truth.

¹⁵ Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 8.

¹⁶ Fatema Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World* (Translated by Mary Jo Lakeland. Cambridge: Perseus, 2002), 85-103.

¹⁷ The effect of the Crusades on the Arab people is nearly unfathomable to the West. The city of Jerusalem was captured in 1099 by Christian armies, who subsequently occupied under the leadership of Godfrey of Bouillon. In 1187, Saladin recaptured the city and surrounding territories from Reynald of Chatillon. All of this through the Western filter may appear to be ancient history, but it was the presence of foreign occupiers during the Crusades (particularly during Saladin's reign) that provided many Arabs with their first interaction with the West. As a reaction to the hostility, liberal learning in Arabia, much of which had its roots in the classic Greek and Roman philosophical traditions, was outlawed. Despite a rich history of intellectual discourse, as the Crusades came to an end, so too did the free market of ideas, when religious scholars banned "ijtihad" (reasoned struggle) and established in its place "taqlid" (blind imitation) as the dominant mode of thought. They continue to justify this by referencing that much of what the West values, such as innovation, imagination, creativity, etc., finds its root in practices that contradict and offend the sovereignty of the one God, such as "image" (the root of imagination) or "create" (the root of creativity). Subsequently, with a ban on creativity and other highly respected characteristics that help our Western nations thrive, the Arab East has regressed into a mediocrity that is proving incredibly dangerous because it is not allowing the population to conceive of creative ways to improve their lives and question the authority of those in positions of power.

The profound consequence that the ban on liberal thought has had, can be discerned in various statistics relative to the number of educational institutions in the Middle East, student-teacher ratios, book sales, etc. Perhaps the most telling indicator, however, has been the number of books translated into the Arabic language. According to a report on Arab Human Development in 2002, published under the United Nations, there were approximately 330 books translated, roughly one fifth that of Greece, each year. More startling yet, since the reign of Caliph Maa'moun in the 9th century, the cumulative total of books translated is about 100,000, almost the average that Spain translates in one year.

Complete statistics regarding human development can be found in the *Human Development Report 2002: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations*, sponsored by the Regional Bureau for Arab States, the United Nations Development Program, and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development.

¹⁸ F. Ja'dan, "Usul al-taqaddum 'ind mufakkir al-Islam," quoted by Fatema Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World* (Mary Jo Lakeland, trans. Cambridge: Perseus, 2002), 47.

¹⁹ Michael Doyle, "International Intervention" (In *Essential Readings in World Politics*. 2nd Edition. Edited by Karen Mingst and Jack Synder. New York: W. W. Norton, 2004.), 351.

²⁰ Adrian Karatnycky, "Muslim Countries and the Democracy Gap" (*Journal of Democracy*. 13.1. 2002), 111.

²¹ Gabriel Almond, "The Intellectual History of the Civic Culture Concept" (In *The Civic Culture Revisited*. Boston: Little and Brown, 1980), 27.

²² Richard Rose, William Mishler, and Christian Haerpfer, *Democracy and Its Alternatives: Understanding Post-Communist Societies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 98.

²³ Ronald Inglehart, "Culture and Democracy" (In *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*. Edited by Lawrence Harrison and Samuel Huntington. New York: Basic Books, 2000), 96.

²⁴ Address by President George W. Bush to the National Endowment for Democracy, delivered on November 6, 2003. Available online at <<http://whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-2.html>>