

War Will Not Bring Democracy to the Middle East

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In recent months a growing chorus has emerged both among members of the Bush administration as well as pundits in major newspapers suggesting that regime change in Iraq would help spread democracy across the entire Middle East. Advocates of this optimistic view argue that toppling Saddam would invigorate the “Arab street” and unleash a democratic wave across the region. The reality is very different. At best these pundits are misinformed of history or at worst, willfully trying to deceive the American public by couching war under the guise of democracy promotion.

During his highly touted address to the United Nations in September, President Bush argued that regime change in Iraq would allow its people to join democratic Afghanistan and democratic Palestine and eventually “inspire reforms throughout the Muslim world” [Sept. 12, 2002]. Similarly, Michael Ledeen, writing in the Wall Street Journal enthusiastically offered that the main mission of the war against Saddam would be to “liberate all the people of the Middle East from tyranny.” [WSJ, Sept. 4, 2002] Joshua Mutavchik of the conservative American Enterprise Institute went even further by suggesting that changes toward democratic regimes in Baghdad and subsequently Tehran would “unleash a tsunami across the Islamic world”. [NYT, August 19, 2002]

While the “tsunami” analogy may be appropriate, the consequences are likely to be the exact opposite from what Mutavchik predicts. As far as I can remember a “tsunami” tends to cause more damage and destruction than good. A more likely scenario from war with Iraq would render the Middle East more repressive and unstable than it is today.

If history is any guide, we should remember our CIA sponsored coup against Iran’s elected Prime Minister Mossadegh in 1953 and the anti-western consequences that resulted. More recently our record in Bosnia should suggest caution and that democracy cannot be imposed through military force, even if a military campaign were to successfully oust an antidemocratic dictator. As we have seen in Afghanistan “the day after” is far more complicated than we would like to think.

In addition, a misguided war effort will play into the hands of extreme elements in the region. Just as the bigoted comments of Reverend Franklin Graham and Jerry Farwell played into the hands of extremist parties in Pakistan, so too has the bellicose rhetoric of the Bush administration triggered increased anti-American fervour throughout the region. Most Arabs and Muslims will see the war as an attempt to exert American imperialism in the region, rather than hopes for true democracy in their countries. The recent poll by Zogby International attested to this fact. The polls showed that the negative perception of the United States is based on American policies — particularly concerning war with Iraq and what is seen as U.S. bias toward Israel in the Mideast conflict — and not a dislike of Western democracy and values.

We therefore need to stop fooling ourselves with the false notion that regime change in Iraq will bring democracy to the Middle East. The reality is that our national interest in fighting terrorism, maintaining access to oil, and protecting the lives of American soldiers will surely overshadow the goal of promoting democracy.

If democracy is what we really want for the people of the Middle East, there are surely cheaper and more effective ways to accomplish this outcome. Earlier this week, Secretary of State Powell announced a \$25 million democratic initiative for the Middle East. This new democracy promotion effort is to be welcomed especially if it goes towards helping disenfranchised Arab citizens and increasing the level of political participation in the region.

The long term consequences of war with Iraq are not clear and therefore it is misleading to optimistically suggest that a wave of democracy is coming to the region. The one thing that is clear from past experience is that the closer we come towards war, the more resentment is fuelled against us. War with Iraq is therefore less likely to bring democracy to the Middle East. Not the opposite.

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