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Rhetoric or Reality Exporting Democracy to the Middle East

**From the EPIIC Symposium at
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Let me start this talk by telling you where I'm coming from; this is from an extremely skeptical view about U.S. capacity — not willingness but the capacity — to actually promote democracy successfully not only in the Middle East but in any country where conditions are essentially not ready for democracy.

What I would like to do is talk first of all about what I think are the main obstacles to democracy in the Middle East at the present time and, secondly, how the United States is trying to approach the problem of democracy promotion there. I think that will show the gap that exists between the approach and the problem.

Why is there such a deficit of democracy in the Middle East as the Arab Human Development report recognized in the 2002 and 2003 editions? The reason is not that Islam is incompatible with democracy. Any religion as complex as Islam, as Christianity, as Judaism, can be reconcilable with democracy or not depending on the interpretation. I think there have been different interpretations at different times. There are liberal interpretations of Islam that are more than compatible with democracy, there are illiberal interpretations of Islam that will never be compatible with democracy.

The real obstacles to democracy in the Middle East come in two areas. One is the very simple fact that power relations at this point are extremely unbalanced. If you look at the Arab regimes, whether they are monarchies or republics, they are all characterized by extremely strong executives — a minister or president — and the other side has no countervailing institutions, no checks and balances. Most parliaments in the Arab world are ineffectual, most are dominated by the government party. In some countries the parliaments don't exist or they are advisor councils that have no teeth, no capacity to provide a countervailing weight to the government. So essentially you have a situation in which the power of the executive is just too great and there is nothing on the other side to hold the executive in check.

The people who believe in democracy have not been able to make a real democracy relevant to the mass of the population. Let me give you an example. One of the most important countries in the Middle East is Egypt. And what you have in Egypt in the 1920s and 1930s was a very flourishing democracy. You had a very important democracy movement which in many ways recreated the patterns that you found in Europe in the course of the nineteenth century. You would hear democracy associated with economic development. You had a truly rising bourgeoisie in that country that had embraced wholeheartedly both the ideal of democracy and the idea of economic growth, private enterprise, and so on.

Now for a short period of time this nation of bourgeoisie could appeal to a lower class that was largely illiterate, that was largely very poor, not particularly ideological as yet, and not terribly interested in the abstract ideals of democracy itself. But it could establish a link to the population because what united the two was opposition to the British presence. And then, of course, the British left, and then Nasser came to power and the Suez Canal went back to Egypt, and essentially nationalism as an anti-British, anti-colonial position stopped having meaning.

Since that time the democratic ideal in Egypt has become the ideal of a very small elite without links to the population. What has taken the place in the popular mind of this sort of national democratic idea, first you had nationalism which in other countries, like in Syria and in Iraq, was about the ideology of the Baath Party, essentially Arab nationalism and Arab socialism. This was an ideology that had a tremendous amount of appeal, popular appeal . . . and I'm talking about Nasser and the Baath Party originally, not the way the Baath Party became in the later period of Saddam Hussein. They were delivering something to the population of these countries. These were the regimes that brought public education, that provided some health care, that provided benefits to the working class of these countries. They did not necessarily do it well. But the fact is that they brought ideas, they brought promises that appealed to the population.

By the late seventies these ideas had lost their appeal. The weaknesses of the system had become clear and these ideas were replaced by another idea that had a tremendous amount of popular appeal, which was various forms of what we call "Islamic fundamentalism," various Islamist ideas, where religion took the center stage in appealing to the population.

So one of the reasons why there are no countervailing forces to check the power of the executive is the fact that ideologies have gotten hold of the hearts and minds of a large segment of the population, a non-democracy ideology. The democrats have never been able to create a constituency. You go and talk to the exponents of democratic parties of the Arab world, and what you find that the democratic parties have their offices in the best part of town. They are always located in the business center, they are always located on the main square or one of the main avenues. They are easy to find.

If you then start looking for the other parties — once it was the Nasserites in various guises, and today it's the Islamic parties — you have a very difficult time finding them. Why? Because they are right in the middle of the slums. So one of the problems of democracy is that we don't have really democratic constituencies.

So what is the United States to do to promote democracy? The answer is we are offering technical help. What the United States does very well in terms of exporting democracy is providing election assistance, providing training for political parties on how to run a political campaign, but if you don't have the constituents you are not going to get very far. So there is a huge gap that separates the kind of activities that the United States would implement when it talks about exporting democracy and the real requirements of these countries.

Andrew Hess is professor of diplomacy, director of The Program for Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, and author of Peace and Political Reform in the Gulf: The Private Sector.

I'd like to make a couple of preliminary remarks. I'm very happy that Saddam Hussein is unemployed and I'm also hopeful that Iraq and Afghanistan will in

good time establish work as nation-states, but I don't think that's around the corner. I'm going to offer the following six reasons why I believe that current discussions in the United States about how democracy will spread in Iraq and Afghanistan is shaped more by rhetorical flourish designed to impress American audiences than a calculated attempt to reflect the political realities in this particular region of southwest Asia.

First, in neither Iraq nor Afghanistan has the United States or its allies created the widespread security in government in which state building can take place. If state building can't take place we're not going to have democracy. It's going to be the rule of the gun and the bombs, and democracy will be simply impossible. Elections in this region of the world, these two states, are continually being postponed. There are large outside military establishments that are present in both Iraq and Afghanistan; this is an indication that probably the security question in this region of the world will last for some time.

There has been little in the way of success in establishing the policing necessary to take on the diffused form of violence that comes from nongovernmental terrorist organizations in this region of the world and a good example of that is the recent employment of my old outfit in the U.S. Marine Corps called the First Marine Division. That's an assault unit, that's not a police force. And it's going over there to Iraq for one period of seven months. They won't even be able to drink tea with the right kind of people in the area that they're supposed to control.

So this leads me to point two, which is that there is little public discussion in the United States of the historical and cultural reasons why the establishment of democracy will be difficult in Iraq and Afghanistan. There is very little mention of why communalism, for example, is a major block to the establishment of democracy in these two states, or what's left of the states in those two regions of Iraq and Afghanistan. There is little discussion of how the patriarchal society that still exists overwhelmingly in the rural sectors of societies and in the cities in Iraq and Afghanistan limit the possibilities for one person one vote in the forms of democracy that are familiar to those of us in the United States. There is ethnic division in both of these states that is not helpful in doing what's necessary to create a structure that has boundaries that are fixed within which there is one law, one use of force, and one form of national culture.

We have various versions of politics, of the political order, that have been bandied about in the newspapers, on the radio, and by American officials. Why not try a federated solution for Iraq? If that idea was carried out we'd have immediate division of Iraq into three parts with all kinds of expulsions, revenge killings, and so on. In Afghanistan we have a division present on the ground right now that has not been dealt with by the powers that have the real military force in Afghanistan, the Tajiks and the Pashtun speakers, between the north and the south; an old problem in Afghanistan not resolved by the sudden presence of American military forces.

There are sectarian divisions in Iraq that are also the subject of constant discussion in newspapers. Shall we have a state that's a Shi'a state? Shall we have the Sunnis in the center, be in control of the politics and the administration of the oil industry? Or how shall we do it? Shall we balance this with that or shall we just forget about it and keep delaying the elections? Then in Afghanistan what are we doing about the warlords?

The fourth point is that it seems there would be a possibility for some kind of democratic order to come about within a reasonable period of time if we had a

benevolent regional environment that would go along with some sort of global recognition by the population in this region of the world, that the international powers are acting – of course the US is the international power – are acting for the benefit of society as a whole. But if we look at the regional situation we find all kinds of border problems, the Turks in the north, the Iranians along the eastern border of Iraq, the Pashtuns that are a cross-border population in Afghanistan, between Pakistan and Afghanistan. I could go on.

But the real problem, I think, is that the great power that's trying to bring a new political order into Iraq and Afghanistan has very little support among the Muslim population in the world or in the region. Just look at all the surveys. Look at all the discussions in the United States of the failure of public diplomacy in this area of the world. How are we going to go about even contending with non-governmental terrorism if we can't have the population thinking that what the United States is doing in this area favors their interests. If we can't handle that, we certainly can't handle the business of convincing them that the better political order for them in future is some form of democracy and not some form of authoritarianism as discussed here just a moment ago.

The fifth problem here is the international support for the project. Will the UN be able to then bring about a change, establish a political order in Iraq or handle the problems of state formation in Afghanistan? What will happen probably is that we will ask the UN to go into Iraq and carry out some sort of a political discussion with the various parties to the conflict, and they may be successful in doing that and then the whole problem will be whether the United States will stay around and implement whatever kind of solution is arrived at by negotiations.

What about the disputes over the question of who's going to control oil? Where's that in the newspapers? Is that a crucial matter? You betcha! It involves not just the parties to the disputes in Iraq, the Sunnis and the Shi'as, but the international consumers of oil in the various areas of the world and who will get what access to Iraqi [water? oil?] is a matter of very big business which needs to be discussed publicly where this particular country is concerned. The disputes about construction, the whole question of whether or not the Food for Peace Program was one big sham and somebody's walked off with billions of dollars is in the newspapers now and that undermines the authority of the powers involved in trying to bring about democracy.

Number six: what about the time to lay down as the basis for the obstruction of democracy in Iraq and Afghanistan? Is that not wrapped in the U.S. rhetoric about threats to the region and to the US? You betcha it is, it's related to where Iraq and Afghanistan fit in the war against terrorism and to the ability of the United States to sustain the war, politically, fiscally and militarily. And that takes us to this whole business of the global war against terrorism and the objectives that are involved in the US interest in fighting the war against terrorism. These involve the destruction of Al Qaeda, other trans-national terrorist organizations, the transfer of Iraq and Afghanistan into prosperous and stable democracies and the democratization of the rest of the autocratic Middle East, the eradication of terrorism as a means of irregular warfare, termination of weapons of mass destruction, the stopping of proliferation of real and potential weapons to other countries. This whole affair is hopeless and unrealistic and militarily and fiscally unsustainable.

So it tells me that what we've been listening to is an awful lot of rhetoric and very little discussion of the hard kinds of realities that people that we train at the

Fletcher School are going to face if they're on the ground in NGOs. Those with experience can tell you what the security situation is in these two countries and how fast we can move forward with these programs for democracy and what we're going to need in the way of a concerted interest and a long-standing and hardnosed policy on the part of the United States to come up with something positive in this area of the world.

Naomi Chazan, former Deputy Speaker of the Knesset and Meretz MK, Israel: professor of Political Science and former chair of the Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

I broke my head on the subject of the topic of this panel. I want to start with three working assumptions. Number one, is the American attempt to export democracy rhetoric or reality? I do not think it is rhetorical I think the United States sincerely believes that it is trying to export democracy to the Middle East, and I also think that kind of approach won't make it a reality. So assumption number one, rhetoric or reality? The answer is neither.

Assumption number two. Exporting democracy. Is democracy an export, a commodity — something to be sent abroad, probably at a high price? Now I thought, maybe naively, that perhaps there is an American brand of democracy, but democracy is not by definition American, and it is not a commodity to be exported. How do I address the topic if there is no possibility of exporting a commodity that isn't American? That's the second working assumption.

And the third working assumption is that it seems that behind this title is the notion that you have to be democratic in order to do other things. For example, in our particular conflict, when the Palestinians democratize then we will make peace. With that kind of sentence there will never be any peace. And there is an assumption of using democracy rather than democratizing and that's the third assumption that I find problematic.

So after I went through this intriguing conversation with myself, and there were people at the Center for International Studies at MIT watching me talking to myself and wondering what was going on, I decided, what I ought to decide, that I have a problem with the question. I think the real question, and now I'm going to be serious, I think the real question is – is it possible to democratize and to maintain vibrant democracies in the Middle East? That's the real question, not whether the US can export it, etc., etc.

Democracies will only last if they are bred at home, nurtured at home and maintained at home, in other words if they are adjusted to local conditions. In order to be adjusted to local conditions — to be home grown — certain ingredients are necessary, and some of these ingredients in my opinion are unexpected or not predictable. But I am a democratic optimist and I understand that you cannot take simplistic notes of democracy and implant them, you have to breed them.

OK, so what I would like to do is get six major ingredients of democracy. I will do it quickly. I think Israel is in many respects a struggling democracy, yes a fraud, but nevertheless a democracy in the Middle East. I think democracy is increasingly, enterprisingly true for Palestinians, and I think it's much more problematic for Iraq.

There are standard ingredients. First, one needs an environment with some modicum of stability. That doesn't mean lack of violence, because sometimes democratizing occurs in a violent context, but you need some stability and some economic predictability or it won't work. That is lacking today in Palestine, and it is

lacking in Iraq. It exists to a certain extent in Israel but insufficiently, and this lack is harming Israeli democracy.

Second ingredient. Everybody likes to talk about a tradition of democracy. I disagree. Israel's democracy was established by Polish chicken farmers who came to Palestine with no democratic experience. Where you need a tradition of democracy you need democrats, committed and dedicated democrats. One finds them in Israel but not all Israelis are committed. There are Palestinians that are real democrats and dedicated to democracy. In Iraq I'm less convinced, but you decide.

The third ingredient of the standard list is democratic institutions. It is boring, people don't like it, and it is not a good topic for evening panels. But democracies are built during periods of transition. Getting rid of dictators does not mean that democracies start overnight, they have to be constructed, and that means you have to figure out constitutions and electoral systems and whether you want presidents or parliamentary democracies, and, yes, how are you going to safeguard human rights and civil rights and how are you going to introduce workable checks and balances. You will engineer democracy during periods of transition. Democratic engineering is crucial.

So these are three standard elements that I want to suggest, three structural ingredients as well. There are no democratic regimes in weak states. You have to have a strong state to have a strong democracy. Maybe the United States is the exception to that rule. Israel is a strong state. It may be weaker today than it was in 1948, but it is a strong state. Palestine doesn't exist as a state yet, and Iraq is collapsing as a state. You can't set up a democratic regime in a collapsing state; it doesn't work.

So your fourth ingredient is a strong state. Your fifth ingredient is a strong civil society. Israel has a vibrant civil society. Palestine has a vibrant civil society. Iraq does not have a tradition of civil society. It's hard to build democracy without civil society. And finally I would say that the third structural and sixth general ingredient is economic structures and social structures including middle classes that promote democracy. It's doable, not by exporting American democracy, but by the United States helping build a home grown democracy. ✨