

Review - American Democracy Promotion in the Changing Middle East

Written by Anthony Billingsley

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ANTHONY BILLINGSLEY, FEB 6 2013

American Democracy Promotion in the Changing Middle East: From Bush to Obama
Edited by Shahram Akbarzadeh, James Piscatori, Benjamin MacQueen and Amin Saikal
London and New York: Routledge, 2012

This is

an important and timely publication. Its focus on the changing circumstances of the Middle East is a reflection of the dilemma facing many Western analysts and policy-makers over the tension between stability, that is seen generally to favour the West's national interests, and change that is long term and uncertain but which is probably the best hope for the democratic project. The book's chapters cover an interesting range of issues that are particularly

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relevant to the challenge facing the United States and have a nice blend of the descriptive with the more theoretical. The discussion in the various chapters has also stood up well to regional developments since they were written. Unfortunately, some of the book's impact is lost in the plethora of typographical and other errors, such as the misspelling of the names of the US, Yemeni and Syrian presidents and the random shifting from English to American spelling. Errors like these should not appear in such a publication and should have been addressed by thorough proof-reading and editing. Chapter 1 is the most seriously afflicted but the problems occur with irritating frequency in most other chapters as well.

Democracy in the American Policy Framework

Perhaps the major dilemma addressed in the book is the question of whether US democracy promotion has been sincere, as one might infer from the rhetoric of Clinton or Bush, or whether it was simply one of a range of policy options for promoting US material and strategic interests to be drawn on when convenient. In this context, it is important that several writers went back beyond the G. W. Bush administration, highlighting the historical pattern at play in US democracy promotion.

While it was not the major focus of his chapter, Cole addresses this issue and highlights the essential dishonesty of the US democratic project in the Middle East. In the context of the Palestinians, he argues that the policy is largely to promote US and Israeli interests in the region. US 'flexibility' concerning human rights is one of the more convincing demonstrations of this approach. Cole also raises the interesting question of the extent to which movements for democracy are home-grown or are largely inspired by the US. Kantian-based US ideology would suggest that democracy is the default position for us all but administration initiatives seem to be based on the presumption that people of the Middle East need to be nudged towards democratic thinking.

Cole's description of Hamas's 2006 electoral victory as a swing to the far right by Palestinian electors is interesting, especially in the light of indications of a similar development in Israel. It is hard to assess Hamas's general ideological policy stance on the right-left continuum, given its limited opportunities under a state of siege and such a depiction of Hamas is open to debate. Such an interpretation would, however, be consistent with the impact of perceived security threats on voters in many countries. Moreover, Hamas economic policies have shown some consistency with those of the Moslem Brotherhood in Egypt from which we might infer a general rightward tendency by the party.

MacQueen's chapter addresses in some detail the dilemma mentioned above between "short-term security and inclusion often at the expense of the long-term viability, functionality and legitimacy".[1] He, like other contributors, notes the continuity from Bush to Obama in the promotion of democracy in the region, highlighting the strongly rhetorical nature of the US commitment and the difficulty of promoting genuine democracy in contexts where there is no democratic tradition.

MacQueen's comparison of Iraq and Afghanistan was interesting in that it enabled the writer to draw out several common themes. The comparison can, however, only go so far, given the significant differences between the two states. Of course, both countries have been occupied by the US and have experienced programmes of democracy promotion. However, Afghanistan is not traditionally seen as part of the Middle East, however it is defined, and the constellation of issues facing Kabul are dramatically different from those challenging Baghdad.

Incompetence or Indifference

Similar themes occur in Maley's interesting chapter. He makes the point that the "US was pitifully ill-prepared for the challenges that it encountered in Iraq".[2] In part that was a result of the arrogance of Rumsfeld and his neo-conservative coterie who rejected considered State Department advice and seemed to believe their own propaganda and ideology about the attractions of the American Way.

The importance placed on the trappings of democracy – elections and parliaments – is an issue raised by a number of the contributors. Maley provides a useful outline of the complexities and pitfalls of the pursuit of democracy through a purely formal or structural approach.

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The Light on the Hill

The chapter by Piscatori on US promotion of a democratic Islam raised some fundamental questions about US attitudes to the rest of the world, not just the Middle East. The assumption that the 'American Way' is not just the best and only way of organising a political system but that the United States has the right and the capacity to impose that approach to life runs through much of the US public discourse. While some may dismiss this as US politicians talking like idealists but acting as realists,[3] it does have lasting effects. As Piscatori observes, US policy over several administrations has been that Islam itself is not the problem. There has, however, long been a problem between official policy and significant US pronouncements and actions. This was highlighted by Bush's reference to a 'crusade',[4] retracted but then repeated, and to "Islamofascism" and by Rumsfeld's remark:

Terrorists do not function in a vacuum. They don't live in Antarctica. They work, they train and they plan in countries ... And they're benefiting from the support of governments ... that are either actively supporting them with money, intelligence and weapons or allowing them to function on their territory and tolerating – if not encouraging – their activities. The best way to get at the terrorist networks is to drain the swamp they live in.[5]

These remarks and those by lesser officials, such as General Boykin,[6] discriminatory actions by the government directed at people of Middle Eastern origin (broadly defined),[7] intemperate and provocative behaviour by public figures, such as the Florida churchman Terry Jones,[8] and random acts of physical violence targeting people of Middle Eastern appearance[9] create a feeling of pervasive American hostility to Islam.

For the United States then to set itself up, as Piscatori explains, to identify those Islamic groups to be blessed with American guidance and for a US administration to explain to Moslems that "peace and tolerance are embedded in the Qu'an"[10] reflects extraordinary arrogance and insensitivity but also implies that, after all, Islam is the problem.

The Economic Dimension

Piggott provides a useful discussion of two aspects of the economic dimension in the US role in the Middle East. One is that "US economic and security interests have always trumped the promotion of democratic values in informing US policy in the region".[11] The other is that economic factors are significant drivers of unrest throughout the region. The dilemma that emerges from these two perspectives is that US support for popular movements across the region may not necessarily be inconsistent with the US' economic interests that Piggott outlines. Economic imperatives are likely to make oil producers operating on broadly democratic principles just as committed to stable markets as the current repressive regimes are. On the other hand, continued US support for repressive monarchies, such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, has the potential to aggravate unrest and add to potential instability in those countries, as well as in the other pro-American monarchies.

Country Studies

Saikal's chapter on Iraq returns to the debate over the genuineness of the US promotion of democracy in the region. Certainly the issue of competence arises in the Iraqi context. His suggestion of a regional approach to Iraq's future is a sensible one but one that faces huge challenges. Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United States all have reasons for undermining such an approach. Iran would oppose any arrangement that would leave it strategically exposed in the Gulf, while the US can be expected to pursue policies that would do just that. One such policy might be to keep Iraq unsettled with the different elites locked in fruitless competition. And the Saudis' unremitting hostility to the Shi'a would play out in attempts to destabilise any Iraqi government dominated by the Shi'a.

In his chapter on Egypt, Bowker accurately sums up the likely course of the Egyptian political saga. His confidence that the system will eventually achieve "a reasonable balance between progress and stability"[12] is probably applicable to most other Middle Eastern societies, even those that have withstood the initial assault of popular discontent. The Egyptian case is particularly important in the light of two specific factors to which Bowker refers. One is the population's level of devoutness, which translates into the likelihood that there will be occasional outbursts of tension between the Moslem and Coptic communities, without disrupting the longer term atmosphere of tolerance.

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This does mean that Islam, not necessarily the Moslem Brotherhood or the Salafis, is likely to be a pervasive force in future Egyptian politics. It always has been so despite efforts from Egyptian leaders to suppress political Islam. In future, Islam is likely to have a more dynamic and central role in the country's politics. This is something the rest of the world will have to come to terms with.

The second factor is the degree of sensitivity of Egyptians to perceived slights, especially from the United States. This has been apparent on many occasions, such as the crash of Egypt Air flight 999 in 1999, when American commentators suggested Egyptian responsibility^[13] or with the incompetence of the Bush administration's attempts to pressure Mubarak to adopt democratising measures.

These factors highlight the need of outsiders to adopt a long-term and patient approach to developments in the Egyptian political system. That may be difficult in the context of US strategic interests, including the relationship with Israel, but a reprise of anything akin to the Bush experience is likely to be counter-productive in the new context.

The final chapter by Phillips underlines how US involvement in Yemen turned a well-regulated state of chaos into a disorderly state of chaos. The heavy American reliance on military and security intervention, especially the resort to drones under Obama, has seen the unravelling of a network of understandings and relationships across the country through which President Saleh managed the tribes and other dissident forces. This is not to suggest that Yemen without Saleh is unthinkable – although he is proving difficult to expunge from the system – but that, as with the other dictators across the region, Saleh took the wrong lessons from the American focus on security and military force in addressing regional problems.

Conclusion

As noted at the start, this is a useful book despite the editing flaws. The Chapters provide some valuable insights into the nature of US democracy promotion in the region. They cover many of the key countries and themes that bear on this issue. It is inevitable that, in any work such as this, choices must be made and there will always issues that others would have liked to see addressed. For my part, it would have been interesting to see a discussion of Palestine and Israel in the book, given the centrality of the problem to people in the Middle East and the United States, a point noted by several of the contributors. The lack of a serious peace process under Obama, the decline in the status of Palestinians in Israel and the Occupied Territories and fears about the future of democracy in Israel itself ^[14] seem to influence greatly regional attitudes to the Americans' pursuit of their national interests.

It would also have been interesting for the book to include discussion of changes in US foreign policy under Obama, since much of the emerging debate seems to have been generated by fears that the United States is withdrawing from its active role in the region, especially concerning the problem of Palestine and Israel. (The 2013 Australia-UK Ministerial meeting, for example, called on the United States to launch a "major effort in 2013 to achieve a negotiated two-state solution with a secure Israel alongside a Palestinian state" and stressed the importance of active US engagement in that dispute.^[15]) Such a discussion might have enabled consideration of the nature and scope of changes in US attitudes and policies that might promote regional interests as well as American interests. This was touched on, for example, by Saikal but in a narrower context.

Having said that, the topics covered represent a useful collection of key issues facing the region and the country studies provide good surveys of country-specific concerns but in a way that highlights the broader relevance of the experiences of those countries concerned.

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foreign policy, especially on the Middle East.

[1] Shahram Akbarzadeh et al., *Ibid.*, p. 47.

[2] Shahram Akbarzadeh et al., *American Democracy Promotion in the Changing Middle East*, London & New York, Routledge, 2013, p. 33.

[3] Shahram Akbarzadeh et al., *Ibid.*, p. 63.

[4] Remarks by President Bush, White House, 16 September, 2001. <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html>. Access 3 January, 2013. On this occasion, Bush remarked that "This crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while. And the American people must be patient. I'm going to be patient."

[5] American Forces Press Service, "Rumsfeld on Terrorists: Drain the Swamp They Live In", Washington, DC, 18 September, 2001. <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=44863>. Access 4 January, 2013.

[6] "US general faulted for anti-Islamic remarks", *Al Jazeera*, 20 August 2004, <http://www.warwithoutend.co.uk/middle-east-and-asia/2004/08/20/us-general-faulted-for-anti-islamic-remarks.php>.

[7] An example of such actions was the Obama administration's response to an attempt to destroy a civilian American airliner near Detroit on Christmas Day, 2009. While acknowledging an intelligence failure, the Administration responded by introducing guidelines that would subject all passengers coming from 14 countries – which happened to be mainly Arab and Moslem.

[8] David Silverberg, "Florida pastor Terry Jones burns Koran after mock trial", *Digital Journal*, 22 March, 2011. Access: January, 2013: <http://digitaljournal.com/article/304937>

[9] Woman charged with New York subway murder, *ABC News*, 30 December, 2012. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-12-30/woman-charged-with-new-york-subway-murder/4447528>. Access 3 January, 2013.

[10] Shahram Akbarzadeh et al., *op cit.*, p. 67.

[11] Shahram Akbarzadeh et al., *op cit.*, p. 83.

[12] Shahram Akbarzadeh et al., *op cit.*, p. 115.

[13] Michael Ellison, "US and Egypt split on fatal plane crash", *The Guardian*, 9 June, 2000. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/egyptair/0,,192889,00.html>. Access 23 January, 2013.

[14] "In its 62nd year, Israel in a diplomatic, security and moral limbo", Ha'aretz Editorial- 19 April, 2010. <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1164012.html>. Also Avraham Burg, "Israel's Fading Democracy", New York Times, 4 August, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/05/opinion/sunday/israels-fading-democracy.html?emc=tnt&tntemail=y>

[15] <http://www.minister.defence.gov.au/2013/01/18/minister-for-defence-aukmin-2013-communique/>