

The United States and the Democratisation of the Middle East

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Western governments have traditionally ignored the Middle East in the context of an area in which to implement their policies for the promotion of democracy. Throughout much of the Cold War, the United States made its war for freedom against totalitarian regimes – a matter firmly rooted in the country's political culture, based on the liberal model – and this slogan was to be used to maximum effect in order to secure a wide range of interests. The Middle East, however, was never included in the discourse, as was deemed advisable in order to preserve the status quo, and to safeguard interests of both a strategic and an economic nature. Subsequently, a fear of a rise of Islam and the argument of peace with regard to Palestine were added to these considerations. The support of authoritarian regimes was the norm. It was in the 1990s that countries in the region were first included in programmes to support democracy run by official agencies such as USAID or by a veritable string of foundations and NGO's fed largely on public money. The beneficiaries in the region are on the whole institutions and NGO's, and the particular areas of interest select-

ed: the strengthening of judicial institutions; the observation of elections; the promotion of civil society (which is defined in very narrow terms); and education. This is an approach that involves very little political risk. There can be no doubt, however, that the issue of promoting democracy in the Middle East has, ever since the summer of 2002, moved high up the US agenda, and the new line is very different in character to the «soft» and indirect encouragement of democratisation. There are a number of reasons why this change has occurred.

If we look back to George W. Bush's electoral campaign, there was nothing at the time to indicate that promoting democracy would become a key issue on the US foreign policy agenda. Two years into his term the theme began to appear more frequently in political discourse, in a shift reminiscent of that of President Reagan during his second term of office when his policy to support the Nicaraguan Contras was opposed by Congress. In Bush's speeches in the summer of 2002 and those made to the United Nations, the theme of democracy could be seen lurking in the wings; a month and a half after the start of the war against Iraq and the issue was now clearly heralded and being used as one of the arguments, along with the presumed existence of weapons of mass destruction and support for international terrorism, of justification for the intervention. In November 2003, by which time there were major

problems on the ground, the issue was thrust into the limelight. In an unprecedented speech, President Bush recognised that the West had for 60 years excused the lack of democracy in the Middle East, and that stability should not be bought at the cost of democracy, and he further promised that democracy would triumph «from Damascus to Teheran». In order to explain the whys and wherefores underlying this progression, the simple reference to a search to legitimise highly unpopular policies is insufficient. Other arguments must also be taken into account.

In the 1990s, the Clinton administration gave fresh impetus to a number of initiatives to promote democracy. In addition to the increase in the aid for democracy in the Middle East (some \$250 million during his terms of office, a modest sum if we compare it with the amounts allocated to other regions, although very different to the figures for previous periods¹), he pointed out to a number of US allies that he expected greater respect for civil liberties (in the Middle East, he instigated a dialogue on the issue with countries such as Egypt, Jordan and Morocco, and outside the region, Vice-president Al Gore criticised the situation in Malaysia and threatened to cut off aid to the Indonesian military), while other regimes (Saudi Arabia, Russia and China) escaped such criticism. As occurred under Carter, the final outcome of these initiatives has been a combination of effects.

¹ According to Sheila Carapico, the sum allocated to projects set up by USAID, the National Endowment for Democracy and the (private) Ford Foundation made the United States the principal donor of funds for democratisation in the region. CARAPICO, S., «Foreign Aid for Promoting Democracy in the Arab World», *Middle East Journal*, vol. 56, no. 3, summer 2002, p. 382. See also OTTAWAY, M., *Promoting Democracy in the Middle East. The Problem of U.S. Credibility*, Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2003.

G.W. Bush's initial rejection of his predecessor's legacy gradually began to change as his period in office advanced, but even though the Bush administration has adopted a discourse of democratisation, it is evident that very different instruments have been chosen as the means to achieve this end in the Middle East. The principal change is the preference for measures that sanction rather than encourage (gradual action affected by and large through incentives). Despite the fact that the Bush administration has launched a number of ambitious projects to promote good governance on an international scale (such as the Millennium Challenge Account, allocated \$5,000 million), it is clear that this form of promotion is not considered a priority when we look at the derisory sum (\$29 million, with a promise of more in future years) allotted to achieve this end in the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) presented in December 2002 by the State Department.

However, neither does the US policy seem credible with regard to the sanctioning measures selected. The United States' stated policy and practice demonstrates that they are prepared to use a wide range of such mechanisms, from public criticism (aimed at countries including Egypt and Saudi Arabia) to the more radical approach of direct intervention in order to bring about a change of regime, examples of such being Iraq and Afghanistan. In these cases, however, the arguments have been so erratic and the policies seemingly so unsuited to the declared objectives as to refute any view that these cases are examples of policies designed to promote human rights. Even so, the fact is that the question of democracy in the region has made its way, via the back door, we might

say, onto the regional and international agenda.

Though the main causes underlying US decisions do not include a hypothetical concern over the matter of democracy in the region, I do not believe that this means that ideological issues and principles should be sidestepped, and I am of the view that they have indeed played a part. The events of 11th September and the alliance between nationalist conservative circles (Rumsfeld, Cheney and Bolton) and the neo-conservatives proper (Wolfowitz, Perle and Adams), also described as «democratic imperialists» by Fidler and Baker,² are two interconnected factors that promote an aggressive vision of exporting the American model to the rest of the world. These two groups share a common agenda, though the neo-conservatives are different from the nationalists in that they are more optimistic and have put together a more ambitious programme of changes, which includes the possibility of shaping regimes with which they are in disagreement through interventions and nation-building processes. The United States already has a long history of military actions, but those cases in which a change in regime and democratic reconstruction («democracy by force») were central were generally related to small states (Haiti, Panama, Granada and Kosovo), and as a rule situated close to the US. Studies on the consequences of those interventions reveal a bleak situation.³

The idea of intervening in Iraq was first raised in the 1990's by conservative politicians who formed the immediate circle around George Bush senior. According to the plans of the time, changes could be introduced into Iraq and from there would spread easily via a domino effect into neighbouring countries.⁴ The political entities that had al-

ready been mentioned were Iraq and the Palestinian Authority, who were to be subject to maximum intervention, and in second place Egypt and Saudi Arabia. These countries are also those that figure in the democratic discourse today. However, the speed of events and the order in which they have taken place has turned the pro-democracy debate into an a posteriori justification of the policies that have been implemented and not of the project's driving motive, and other factors confirm this to be the case. The considerations connected with the war against terrorism once again indicate that it would be advisable for the US to form an alliance with states with which it would otherwise not choose to ally itself, such as Pakistan, Kazakhstan, the Indonesian military and Malaysia.⁵ This is despite the fact that a number of the members of the administration repeatedly raise the link between authoritarianism and frustration and terrorism, a connection made in relation to Saudi Arabia. It is to be expected, therefore, that a number of modest yet positive gestures made in Belarus, Zimbabwe and Myanmar could be contradicted at any time as the war on terrorism advances. The double standard, an intrinsic element of the United States' global politics, is today more evident than some years ago, as demonstrated by its unconditional support for Israel. The hidden agenda in the Middle East is not as invisible as it previously was. A further consideration is the obvious fact that in the short term, transitions to democracy in the countries of the region would bring political sectors to power that would strongly question some of the pillars of US policy in the region. And this situation would be hard to accept for the United States, and for Western countries in general.

² Fidler and Baker base themselves on the analysis of Ivo Daalder, and also consider a third group, the pragmatists, who include Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice. FIDLER, S.; BAKER, G., «America's democratic imperialists», *Financial Times*, 6 March 2003.

³ This is the conclusion of the evaluation produced by PEI, M.; KASPER, S., *Lessons from the Past: The American Record in Nation-Building*, Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2003.

⁴ This discourse includes the identification of a number of states in the region as the US's most bitter enemies, the so-called «rogue states» of Libya, Syria and Iran.

⁵ CAROTHERS, T., «Promoting Democracy and Fighting Terror», *Foreign Affairs*, January-February 2003.

THE UNITED STATES AND DEMOCRACY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: REFERENCE DOCUMENTS

Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)

Announced on 12th December 2002 by the American Secretary of State, Colin Powell, the MEPI is a Presidential initiative founded for the support of economic, political and educational reform efforts in the Middle East. The MEPI strives to link Arab, US and global private sector businesses, non-governmental organisations, civil society elements and governments together to develop innovative policies and programmes to achieve this objective. In the words of President George Bush, the United States reaffirms its commitment to the Middle East through this initiative. The MEPI has four main reform areas: the economic pillar, the political pillar, the educational pillar and the field of women's empowerment.

<http://mepi.state.gov/>

Ottaway, Marina, *Promoting Democracy in the Middle East. The problem of U.S. credibility*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, March 2003

After decades of paying no attention what-

soever to the issue of democracy in the Middle East, the US foreign policy community has this past year placed it in a position of central importance. Marina Ottaway points to a problem of fundamental significance: the lack of credibility of the United States in the Arab world in presenting itself as a promoter of democracy in the region. Though the author recognises that this problem does not have an immediate solution, the book indicates mechanisms with which the United States could try to resolve this lack of credibility, with the objective of acquiring a true commitment to the democratisation in the region.

<http://www.ceip.org/files/pdf/wp35.pdf>

***Supporting Human Rights and Democracy: the U.S. Record 2002-2003*, Department of State, U.S. Government, 24th June 2003**

Report, submitted to Congress by the American Department of State, complementing the annual reports on Human Rights of 2002.

<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2002/index.htm>

This document analyses the situations of democracy and respect for human rights in ninety-two nations, and emphasises the measures undertaken by the United States for their promotion. In the chapter devoted to the Middle East, the report points out the advances made in terms of democratisation and protection of human rights in the last few years. However, it also outlines serious deficiencies at economic, political and social levels. In this sense, the report emphasises the continuous efforts made by the government in order to promote pluralism, economic growth, and respect for human rights and fundamental liberties in the region as the setting in motion of the MEPI reveals. In the specific analysis according to countries, the report focuses on the evaluation of the situation in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and Yemen.

<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/shrd/2002/>