

Bush's Middle East Vision

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Many Europeans are frustrated with, if not baffled by, the Bush administration's approach to the Middle East. They see a US administration obsessed with Iraq, yet passive on an Arab-Israeli conflict that Europeans believe poses a greater threat to regional security and requires far more attention than it is getting. In the more extreme view, Bush is seen as in the pocket of the hawkish, pro-Israeli lobby in the United States, and is more interested in winning votes and avenging his father's failure to oust Saddam Hussein than in bringing peace, justice and stability to the Middle East.

In fact, however, the Bush administration does have something of a Middle East vision based on more than domestic political considerations. At the heart of the plan is the determination to use America's unprecedented power to reshape the Middle East by supporting America's friends in the region, opposing its enemies and seeking to promote democracy and freedom. This means using force to overthrow the dictatorship in Iraq, promoting gradual political reform among the moderate Arab regimes and standing by Israel until the Palestinians understand that they will get nowhere with violence, but instead can live in a secure, recognised state if they rein in terror and compromise with Israel's existence. Not all members of the administration fully share this vision – the result of a particularly American optimism about being able to reshape the world through the application of American power and ideals – but the President himself seems to be sold on it. And whether or not one thinks that it makes any sense – and there are plenty of reasons to believe that Bush's assumptions are misguided and that the approach will fail – it is important to understand and take seriously the new thinking in Washington.

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The assumptions behind the vision

There are at least four main assumptions behind Bush's strategy for the Middle East, the first and most basic of which is that the status quo has become unacceptable. For decades prior to 11 September 2001, the United States basically had a deal with repressive governments throughout the Arab world: they could run their countries more or less however they wanted, as long as they were willing to sell oil at reasonable prices to the West, act as strategic allies of the United States and not threaten the Middle Eastern regional order. With the 11 September terrorist attacks, however, this deal has come into serious question. It was long questioned on moral grounds by liberal idealists on the left and neo-conservatives on the right, but those views now have much more support, as the costs of the old policy have become more apparent.

What is wrong with the status quo? Whereas previously it was a problem primarily for the peoples of the region (who had to live without freedom), it has now become a problem for Americans themselves. It was not lost on Americans that the majority of the 11 September hijackers came from Saudi Arabia and Egypt, US allies where the combination of repressive regimes and American support for them (and for Israel) led to alienation, resentment and hatred for the West. The practice of these and other states to protect their legitimacy, by couching themselves in Islamic rhetoric, permitting and even encouraging anti-American and anti-Israel expression as an outlet for populations not allowed to protest in other ways, and allowing the financing of Islamic terrorist networks, has now come to be seen – perhaps belatedly – as a threat to Western security. As American critics of the traditional US policy often point out, the United States is often hated by the populations of countries where Washington supports the repressive regimes in place but popular where Washington opposes them – as in the case of Iran. It is not that Americans or anyone else have a ready-made alternative to the old 'deal', but the point is that it is coming to be seen as no longer viable.

Another aspect of the status quo that Bush feels must be changed concerns Iraq. Europeans who criticise US plans for regime change, the administration believes, underestimate the degree to which the status quo on Iraq policy itself contributes to the problem of anti-Western resentment, suffering in the region and terrorism. As long as Saddam Hussein is in power, Iraq will remain a brutal police state that represses its people and threatens its neighbours. Moreover, his continued rule will require the maintenance of economic sanctions (lest Saddam develop nuclear weapons that he would use to dominate the region), no-fly zones and significant numbers of US troops in neighbouring countries like Saudi Arabia. All these policies (particularly the sanctions that Saddam

wrongly but successfully argues are the cause of Iraq's humanitarian problems, and the troops in Saudi Arabia) contribute directly to the anti-American and anti-Western sentiments that fuel Islamic terrorism. Thus, European critics of regime change need to recognise that the alternative means leaving in place a status quo that itself creates a serious threat to the West.

A second assumption underpinning the Bush approach is that Iraq's development of weapons of mass destruction poses an unacceptable threat that would make long-term peace and stability in the region impossible. Most critical here is Saddam's pursuit of nuclear weapons, which the Americans believe he will eventually get if he remains in power. Whereas many Europeans seem to believe that even a nuclear Iraq could be contained and deterred, the Bush administration worries that a nuclear Iraq could again commit regional aggression – perhaps again invading Kuwait – and that this time the world might be deterred from stopping him, or more precisely, rolling back his invasion, because of his ability to respond with a nuclear strike. This is a serious concern that should not be underestimated in trying to understand Bush's motivations for regime change in Iraq. A related point is the concern that Iraq's biological, chemical, or radiological weapons could fall into the hands of terrorists who would use them against the United States. While it is true that Saddam is unlikely to have any interest in cooperating with Islamic terrorists – who are as much his enemy as America's – he has also demonstrated a desire for vengeance and hatred for the United States that has often caused him to take major risks. In 1993, for example, he launched a plot to assassinate former President George Bush, purely for the purpose of vengeance, despite the real risk that had he succeeded and been found out his regime would have been overthrown. For Americans with a traditionally low tolerance for vulnerability and a fresh memory of the large-scale killing of 11 September and the anthrax attacks that followed, living with that risk is unacceptable.

The next set of assumptions concerns Israel and its neighbours. The Bush administration came to office with a strong bias against getting bogged down in what it feared would be futile negotiations on Israeli–Palestinian peace. This resulted from its perception of the Clinton administration's failed efforts. For seven years following the 1993 Oslo agreement, the Clinton administration made achieving a Palestinian–Israeli peace settlement a foreign-policy priority, devoting huge amounts of energy, time, money and political capital to the issue over the course of the president's two terms in office. In 2000, in the Bush view, Clinton gambled on the Camp David summit, pushed the Israelis to offer more than they ever had before in the name of peace, himself put forward

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proposals (the December 2000 'Clinton parameters') that may have exceeded what Israeli domestic politics would accept – and still the response from the Palestinian side was terrorist violence, supported by Yasser Arafat himself. If that was not enough to convince them that peace was impossible until there was a viable Palestinian partner in place, Bush's own tentative foray into Middle East peacemaking – the sending of envoys Colin Powell and Anthony Zinni both met with more Palestinian violence – pushed him back to his original, 'hands-off' approach. The Bush team now believes that peace will not be possible, no matter what the United States does, until the Palestinian people have a leadership in place that is both willing and able to make the difficult compromises inherent in any conceivable 'land for peace' deal.

The final assumption behind the administration's vision for the Middle East is that in the long run, peace and stability – and an end to anti-Western terrorism – will not be possible until the region's regimes become more democratic. Again, not all members of the administration put a high near-term priority on democratisation, but the long-term goal is there. Many of the key thinkers behind the Bush administration approach are imbued with a neo-Wilsonian sense of idealism that rejects European 'realism' or cynicism about the possibility to spread freedom and democracy in the Arab world. Just as 'we' defeated Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan and then installed democratic, pro-Western regimes there, and just as we defeated communism and spread democracy and freedom to Eastern Europe and Russia, the next task is to do so in the Middle East. Like the struggle against communism, it might take 70 years to achieve, but all the more reason to get started on it now rather than being resigned to the miseries and dangers of the status quo. Unlike in Wilson's original vision, moreover, the spread of democracy will entail more than just treaties, multilateral institutions and fine rhetoric, but rather muscular diplomacy, strict containment and sometimes even the use of force.

Implementing the vision

The more realistic members of the Bush administration are aware that implementing this grand vision will not be smooth or easy. There will be setbacks along the way and the final product will inevitably be incomplete. But they think they know what implementation entails.

The first step in the process would be regime change in Iraq. Rather than pursue, as did Clinton, an Israeli–Palestinian peace that will be

elusive until Palestinians know they cannot achieve all their goals, or political reform in Saudi Arabia (which is impossible so long as the United States remains so dependent on the Saudis for stabilisation of the oil market), the idea is to start with the removal of Saddam Hussein. Changing the regime in Iraq would have several advantages. It would eliminate a dictator who has repressed, impoverished and terrorised his people for decades. It would allow for the lifting of sanctions on Iraq and the rebuilding of that country's oil production network, generating billions of dollars of revenue to be spent on the Iraqi people. It would reduce the need for American troops in Saudi Arabia, removing a serious thorn in US–Saudi relations and an important source of Muslim resentment that inspires Islamic terrorists against the United States. By developing Iraq's vast oil potential over the long term, it would lessen America's dependence on Saudi Arabia, allowing the United States more easily to press for political reform there. Finally, and in some ways most important, the Bush team believes that the elimination of the Iraqi regime will send a decisive message to friends and adversaries alike throughout the Middle East: threaten the United States and its friends in the region and you will pay a terrible price. The development of a freer, more democratic Iraq allied to the United States would show the entire Arab world that siding with the United States can bring peace, prosperity and freedom, whereas opposing it can bring heavy costs.

The second phase in the project would be an Arab–Israeli peace. By standing resolutely behind Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Bush believes he will convince the Palestinians that they will get nowhere with violence, a message the administration wants the entire world to understand as part of the war on terrorism. The Bush team, like many Israelis on the right of the political spectrum, believes that, particularly in the Middle East, signs of strength are respected but weakness is punished – thus they believe that Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2001 did not entice the Arab world toward compromise but, rather, incited it to further violence, with Palestinians attempting to implement the Hizbollah model. Bush apparently believes that Palestinians will eventually recognise that their second *intifada* has been a disaster not only for Israel but for themselves: thousands of Palestinians dead, the Palestinian economy devastated, the Palestinian Authority undermined, Arafat marginalised, the Israelis back in West Bank cities and the link between suicide bombings and Palestinians embedded in the minds of people around the world. So instead of rewarding Palestinians for violence, Bush would reward them to stop: his 24 June 2002 Rose Garden speech held out the vision of a recognised Palestinian state that would receive American support if Palestinians elected a new leadership and cracked

down on terrorism. Thus the choice is theirs – continue the armed struggle and end up with a fractured society, ongoing violence and defeat in the face of US-backed Israeli strength, or accept the offer of what they have never had before, a recognised state that would receive American political and financial support and a place among the community of nations.

The final piece in the puzzle would be the most difficult to achieve (as if the other pieces were not difficult enough) – promoting democracy and freedom in the region. No one believes this can be done instantaneously, but Washington does at least want to start making progress. One part of the process would simply be getting on the right side of the issue (as some administration supporters would put it), and articulating the vision that the United States stands for. Bush began to do this in his January 2002 State of the Union speech, in which he not only denounced the ‘axis of evil’ that included Iran and Iraq, but also called for sweeping political change in the Arab world. ‘America’, Bush asserted,

will lead by defending liberty and justice because they are right and true and unchanging for all people everywhere. ... America will always stand firm for the non-negotiable demands of human dignity: the rule of law; limits on the power of the state; respect for women; private property; free speech; equal justice; and religious tolerance. America will take the side of brave men and women who advocate these values around the world, including the Islamic world, because we have a greater objective than eliminating threats and containing resentment. We seek a just and peaceful world beyond the war on terror.¹

Whereas Europeans tend to scoff at such rhetoric and ambitions, many in the Bush team like to recall similar scepticism when Ronald Reagan denounced the Soviet Union as an ‘evil empire’ and called for democracy and freedom there. Indeed, Bush explicitly cites the example of Reagan, who

believed that history is on the side of human liberty; that all tyranny must be temporary, because liberty is the universal hope of all mankind. [Reagan] knew that the cause of freedom is served by moral clarity, a willingness to call oppression and evil by their proper names.²

Other administration officials, most notably Secretary of State Colin Powell and his Policy Planning Director Richard Haass, have also begun to speak about the need for the United States to support democracy in the Muslim world. In a 4 December 2002 speech to the Council on Foreign Relations, Haass argued that previous Democratic and Republican administrations had not given democratisation sufficient priority, and announced that ‘US policy will be more actively engaged in supporting democratic trends in the Muslim world than ever before’.³ A week later,

Powell announced a new 'US-Middle East Partnership Initiative' that would provide American support and \$29 million of initial funding for a variety of programmes to promote civil society, political participation and democracy in the Arab world.⁴

Many in the Bush administration also argue that changing the Iraqi regime will be a key step in this process. By demonstrating that an Arab country can be free, democratic and prosperous, the US would show the rest of the region what is possible. And by lessening US dependence on undemocratic partners like Saudi Arabia, America would be in a much stronger position to press them on issues like human rights, repression, support for the most scurrilous anti-Americanism and corruption. Over time, the peoples in the Arab world – like people elsewhere (including in parts of the Muslim world) – will come to see that capitalism, freedom and liberal democracy are the best principles on which to organise society, and that the United States is the main proponent of those values everywhere.

Will it work?

There are plenty of reasons to be sceptical about Bush's grand vision, which underestimates the difficulties inherent in democratisation, understates the price the United States pays in Arab and world public opinion for seeming not to care about the plight of the Palestinian people, and overlooks the inherent tensions between fighting a war on terrorism that requires cooperation from Arab regimes and seeking to impose political reform on those very regimes.

There is no doubt, for example, that a decisive military victory over Saddam Hussein and the quick replacement of his regime by a stable democracy would have a dramatic effect on the Middle East. But some of the assumptions behind this scenario – that an attack on Iraq will not have unintended consequences (like high Arab civilian casualties, the use of weapons of mass destruction or the involvement of Israel); that an American occupation of Iraq will over the long-term be accepted in the Arab world; or that the US will really be able to impose stability and democracy in an artificial state that has never had much of either – are extremely optimistic at best and irresponsible at worst. It may well prove necessary to invade Iraq to deal with a nuclear threat that should, in fact, be seen as unacceptable, but to do so because the US thinks that this will provoke democracy and pro-Americanism in the Middle East is probably naïve. It is also excessively optimistic to think that defeating Iraq will somehow convince the Palestinians and their supporters in the Arab world that their struggle is futile and that their only choice is now to bow to the new regional power – the United States – and its Israeli ally. Indeed, while it is true that the Saddam's defeat in the Gulf War and the collapse of the Soviet Union were

in part responsible for the Palestinian decision to accept the Oslo peace process, neither these factors – nor for that matter the defeat of many other Arab regimes over the years – have prevented the Palestinians from continuing their struggle today, more violently than ever. The struggle of those who want to use violence to destroy Israel is indeed futile; but it is not the removal of Saddam Hussein that is going to convince them.

More specifically on the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, the Bush approach vastly underestimates the cost for the United States of a stand-offish policy that gives the impression of indifference to the Palestinians' plight. Bush is right to denounce the Palestinian Authority's support for terrorism and to have concluded that Palestinians will only achieve their goals once their leadership is changed (though the particular emphasis on the need to remove Arafat, at a time when Palestinians themselves are growing disenchanted with him, probably only prolongs his rule). But to do that while making Ariel Sharon the most frequent visitor to the Oval Office; doing nothing to oppose Israeli settlement activity; calling Sharon a 'man of peace' (a moniker it is not clear that Sharon himself would choose); allowing cabinet officials like Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to refer to the 'so-called occupied territories'; and failing even to appoint a high-profile Middle East envoy (or even, until December 2002, a senior official at the National Security Council to focus on the issue) does give them impression to the Arab world that the United States is not an honest broker in the conflict.⁵ Moral clarity and steadfastness are admirable qualities, but it is misguided to believe that simply standing firm will produce a Palestinian partner that will bring this conflict to an end. (Those who believe in resoluteness alone often fail to acknowledge the possibility, indeed the likelihood, that the other side might also prove capable of resoluteness, and overlook the many cases – most recently Russia in Chechnya – where rebellious populations do not get the intended message, no matter how clearly the other side speaks the language of force.) Bush is right to support Israel's right to defend itself and to call on Palestinians to reform their government, but he will have make clear that his support for a Palestinian state is more than rhetorical, that he is prepared to engage and assume political risk, and that the Israeli side will also have to make painful compromises, including the withdrawal from many settlements and ending the expansion of others, if he really wants to create a chance for peace.

Finally, the Bush vision of bringing democracy and freedom to the Middle East, while an admirable objective, may prove inconsistent with other key goals – like the war on terrorism and the need for Middle Eastern oil. Bringing democracy to artificial, ethnically heterogeneous and economically underdeveloped states would be an enormous challenge under any

circumstances. But to do so at a time when America needs the cooperation of their repressive regimes to share intelligence, turn over terrorists, crack down on funding for Islamic groups and lend their territory for US military deployments, or even the invasion of neighbouring countries, may prove impossible. It will also be hard – indeed it would be risky – to try to change the nature of the regime in a place like Saudi Arabia, so long as the US remains extremely dependent on the Saudis to stabilise the world oil market, as is likely to be the case for a very long time. Changing the forms of government in the Middle East is also problematic because in most cases, there is little prospect in the near-term of replacing the current leaderships with anything better (and the real imposition of democracy anytime soon could produce Islamic or other regimes that might be even more anti-American or anti-Israeli than the current ones.)

The United States should line up on the side of freedom and support limited experiments with democracy, as is happening in Bahrain, Qatar and Jordan, and it should denounce the repression of individual liberties, such as is happening in Egypt. Little by little, the United States can perhaps encourage some of these governments to reform, spread accurate information in the region (to counter the current state-sponsored propaganda) and convince the people of the region both that free societies are in their best interest and that the United States is on the side of freedom. But the US must also be realistic. While it is fine for the United States to talk about democracy and freedom in the Arab world, Bush is unlikely to achieve it during his presidency, or even his lifetime.

Much of the Bush vision, then, is problematic and, in the best case, will take generations to realise. Some of the assumptions are wrong, and some aspects of implementation are blind to the harsh political realities of the region. But Europeans and other critics should also admit that there is more to the Bush view of the Middle East than domestic politics, oil, or a filial desire for revenge. The United States cannot just 'produce Middle East peace' (Clinton tried that); there are good reasons to get rid of Saddam Hussein; and, while unrealistic in the short-run, the long-term vision of reforming Arab regimes and bringing more freedom to the people of the region is highly admirable. Neither the Bush administration nor anyone else has all the answers in the Middle East. But at least they are raising the right questions, tackling (some of) the hard issues, and acknowledging that something must be done to a status quo that is contrary to the interests of the people of the region and the West.

It is misguided to believe that simply standing firm will produce a Palestinian partner

Notes

- ¹ See Bush's State of the Union address of 29 January 2002.
- ² See Bush's Keynote Address at a Ceremony Honoring President and Mrs. Reagan, The United States Capitol, 16 May 2002.
- ³ See Richard N. Haass, Director, Policy Planning Staff, 'Towards Greater Democracy in the Muslim World,' Speech to Council on Foreign Relations, Washington DC, 2002.
- ⁴ See Colin L. Powell, 'The US-Middle East Partnership Initiative: Building Hope for the Years Ahead', lecture to the Heritage Foundation, 12 December 2002, Washington DC.
- ⁵ See 'President Bush, Secretary Powell Discuss Middle East. Remarks by the President and Secretary of State Colin Powell in Photo Opportunity', The Oval Office, The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 18 April 2002, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/04/20020418-3.html. For Rumsfeld's references to 'so-called occupied territories' and the 'so-called occupied area', see Secretary Rumsfeld Town Hall Meeting, Tuesday, 6 August 2002, United States Department of Defense.

