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# THE COUNTER-NARRATIVE OF PEACEFUL DEMOCRATIC CHANGE: A CRITIQUE OF 'THE WAR ON TERROR'

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## INTRODUCTION

Historians, like Timothy Garton Ash, have reminded us that most of the radical political and economic transformations of the last quarter-century have been brought about with little or no bloodshed. The end of the Cold War, the demise of Communism, and the rise of new

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democratic states, of varying quality, all represent profound historical change. These revolutions without violence—also known as “civil resistance”—often take the form of mass rallies and demonstrations and are evident in the largely leaderless, but Internet-coordinated, overthrow of the governments, as was the case in the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia and the mass protests in Cairo.<sup>(1)</sup>

The ongoing Arab uprisings have proven wrong oriental constructions and depictions of the Arab people as regressive, apathetic, and resigned to their national politics. These uprisings, as Andrew J. Bacevich notes, have demonstrated that the people of the Middle East and North Africa have “an organic capacity to engineer change themselves, demolishing the patronizing notion that they (and by extension their neighbors) need outside oversight, guidance, or protection.”<sup>(2)</sup> The twenty-first century points us in a different direction insofar as recalibrating our relations with the countries and people of the Middle East and North Africa is concerned. The fact remains that the century-long battle to control the region is coming to an end and no amount of high-tech ordnance and military supremacy can alter the outcome.<sup>(3)</sup>

On a much broader level, the 2011 uprisings sweeping across the Middle East and North Africa have rendered the old bargain with local autocrats in the region fundamentally floundered. The Arab awakening is likely to revive pro-democracy movements in some countries of the region and cause new identities to surface among others. This new wave of pressure for democratic reforms is from below and has already caused the downfall of two regimes (Tunisia and Egypt), while threatening to engulf the entire region. The Obama administration is betting on the counter-narrative of peaceful democratic change as the most effective way to undermine the ability

of terrorist groups and networks, such as al-Qaeda, to operate and recruit. This is a safe bet, even as the region's complexity presents problems to its enduring success.

This paper's core argument is that the right to depose unjust rulers, recognized as one of the central tenets of many Islamic teachings, should be exercised by local people. Military intervention and the global campaign against terrorism and their enabling established orders are costly, destabilizing, and counterproductive. It is important to understand the limits to what can be done in those circumstances where opposition forces choose from the very beginning violent means of changing the government. Although foreign policy is full of trade-offs, it should be noted that the use of force can be justified on humanitarian grounds in the cases of massacre and ethnic cleansing as has recently been the case in the UN and NATO airstrikes in Libya.

## **PEACEFUL DEMOCRATIC CHANGE**

A quick glance at the tidal wave of change in the Middle East and North Africa demonstrates the inevitability of change in an age of the youth revolution and the failure of traditional party politics to generate democratic change. Increasingly, the role of the powerful and foreign meddlers in upholding authoritarian but pro-Western regimes in the region has become practically obsolete given the homegrown uprisings. But first let us turn to a further digression into history of why in the words of some the chickens have come home to roost. In the past half century, some things have changed and others have remained quite the same. Palestinians are homeless and still in search of sovereign independence, and they see no end in sight despite

frequent international condemnation of Israeli occupation and lethal Israeli reprisals against Palestinian uprisings since 1987 and the more recent siege of Gaza (2006-2011).

The United States acts as the sole extra-regional hegemonic power on the basis of its military pre-eminence in the area. Though its power is relatively unchallenged, the United States has garnered significant criticism while invading countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq. It should be noted that in seeming juxtaposition from its rhetoric and overt goals the US both guarantees the persistence of pro-Western, authoritarian, dysfunctional and corrupt regimes, while supplanting and stifling democratic elections, the most prominent example being the Hamas regime in Gaza and the only forced support of protests against longstanding regional allies: Hosni Mubarak, Ben Ali. Many of these regimes owe their political longevity and power to their willingness to cooperate with U.S. foreign policy. In return, the United States has exerted little or no political or diplomatic pressure on these governments to adopt reforms. Yet these countries remain vulnerable to internal revolts in the long term. It seems with recent history that the toleration of the indigenous populace for these autocrats may be short lived.

One of the most glaring examples of this hypocrisy was certainly Egypt. Mubarak and its regime were seen to perpetuate the interests of a corrupt regime and as a ruler who owed his power to his external support and foreign assistance from the United States (\$1.5 billion annually). The U.S. backing of the region's feckless and banal regimes alienated reformist social movements and further discredited U.S. foreign policy. The hypocrisy of the U.S.'s rhetoric and their clear support of avowedly anti-democracy rulers was bound to create some form of backlash. Today, nearly 30 percent of the Egyptian

population lives below the poverty line.<sup>(4)</sup>

Moreover, uneven development has led to the emergence of an affluent class, and a predominantly lower middle class and poor, relatively undeveloped, cities such as Cairo and Alexandria. Since 1991, under IMF and World Bank guidance, Egypt has adopted a myriad of neoliberal policies. Its privatization policies have constantly led to workers' strikes and demonstrations, both of which served as the pretense for continued mass youth revolt. The revolutions at Tahrir Square were but the most recent incarnation of a longstanding fight by workers, and others to gain a greater share of power and influence against the Mubarak regime.<sup>(5)</sup>

For the first time since the post-war period, across the Middle East and North Africa, a shared and common Arab identity has swept the streets of the Arab world. For lack of a better term, let us call this notion Pan-Arabism. This new narrative is neither about the United States and its regional wars and military interventions, or the Arab-Israeli conflicts, nor is it about military coups or assassinations. It is in fact about the first modern Arab uprisings against poverty, unemployment, and general recession. These unrests have been enunciated both by the populace and the regional media as a method of achieving dignity, liberty, and the rule of law, as much as they have been a backlash against tough economic times. Perhaps the latter is best captured by the fact that these movements have had no ideological or political leaders. While this lack of leadership may have contributed to the short-term success of the movement, it remains to be seen whether or not it will allow for a consistent path to eventual success for parties outside established power nodes.

Far from being called a social movement at this stage—these uprisings are largely street protests emblematic of a sense of shared

Arab identity and frustration spontaneously erupting through failed economic and political systems. This moment in history is about the Arab street and the Arab world, which have become much crowded and far more destitute than years past. Our analytical gaze thus must be focused on the causes of economic frustration and resentments toward Arab governments. One of the most incredibly inspiring characteristics of these uprisings has been the largely peaceful nature of their demand for democratic change. The protestors in Tunis and Tahrir Square, inspired by figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and the writings of political scientist Gene Sharpe (2003), have at least at this early stage managed to avoid the temptation to use violent means to battle their corrupt governments.<sup>(6)</sup> While the groups in Egypt and Tunisia have sacrificed to achieve a miraculous success, the same cannot be said for other problem areas in the region—Libya, Syria, and Yemen all require further discussion and examination.

### **THE CASE OF LIBYA**

Unlike Tunisia and Egypt, which are ethnically homogenous, modern nation-states, Libya represents a difficult and highly complex case to examine given the country's tribal texture, rentier state, vast landmass, and deserts. How far to go, and what means must be employed to end the violence in Libya and depose Col. Muammar Qaddafi's repressive, regime pose daunting challenges to the international community. At the same time, it should be noted, that while one waits for the evidence of atrocities to rise to the level of genocide before the world can act to stop the Qaddafi regime from indulging in wanton violence for its self preservation, it is just as fundamentally a defective policy

as taking a neutral position in the face of unfolding violence. Perhaps more problematic is the question of why NATO has rushed to come to the aid of the Libyan opposition movements while the brutal suppression of opposition groups in Bahrain are either marginalized or tacitly approved in the name of national security. To this end, the Obama administration's foreign policy risks degenerating into a "circus of confusion" or at best a state of debilitating inconsistency if urgent action is not taken to achieve mission clarity. In view of this fact, the standard explanation from the White House maintains that it is virtually impossible to be consistent in foreign policy. If one engages to protect civilians, one risks becoming embroiled in what may turn out to be a lasting, violent, and ultimately uncertain civil war; however, to not act is to invite violent repression from leaders the region over.

Dealing with Libya poses several different challenges. First, Libya is less dependent on the global trading system and somewhat isolated from the outside world's pressures. Nearly 95 percent of the country's export earnings come from oil and 72 percent of the state budget is based on oil revenues.<sup>(7)</sup> Resultantly, there are many European and Asian countries that are keen on pursuing their commercial interests in Libya. Secondly, Qaddafi's 41-year reign has systematically destroyed civil society, political parties, and other civil organizations. While a similar charge has been leveled at Tunisia and Egypt, the condition of opposition in those governments is relatively sanguine compared to the domination and vicious extermination of all dissident voices in Libya. For example with the exception of the state, there are practically no effective institutions in place for redress of political or social grievances, and this is precisely why the tribal system constitutes all major social and power networks within Libya.

A complex vortex of tribal affiliation, identities, ties, and interests accounts for almost all major social and power relationships within the regime, the military, and what passes for political society. A quick overthrow of Qaddafi might not necessarily guarantee stability and may in fact ensure continued bloodletting.<sup>(8)</sup>

A relatively persuasive case can be made that Libya has forfeited its claim to sovereignty given the use of foreign mercenaries to attack pro-democracy supporters and shed the blood of innocents even at funerals for the recently fallen.<sup>(9)</sup> There is a strong urge on the part of the international community to invoke the “responsibility to protect” where a local government is unwilling or unable to help its own population. The emerging challenge of protecting civilians from mass atrocities requires developing new capacities—national as well as international—to intervene effectively and constructively. At work in this case are both the civilian immunity principle and the notion of Just War theory which describes when and how an outside government is compelled to act in the defense of a beleaguered or violently oppressed polity.<sup>(10)</sup> In the case of Libya, Qaddafi regime is directly attacking its own people.

Aside from this inconsistency, NATO’s mission in Libya is rather vague and begs the imperiling dilemma and the troubling prospect of an imagined endgame: Is the United States in fact plotting for regime change or is it seriously attempting to protect innocent civilians? The two Resolutions concerning the Libyan situation, approved by the UN Security Council, seek different and manifestly contradictory missions. Whereas Resolution 1970 refers explicitly to an arms embargo, Resolution 1973 underscores the importance of enforcing a no-fly zone “by any measures necessary.” The needed means to achieve the necessary ends might further embroil the United States

and NATO into an open ended civil conflict. The options envisaged under this rubric are in fact quite unlimited and may with great likelihood lead to a disturbing and ill-conceived mission creep. This confusion notwithstanding, with Libya providing only 2 percent of the world's oil supply, any attempt to portray the United States and its Western allies (especially France and England) as bent on invading yet another Muslim-Arab state for its oil reserves can be exaggerated but not necessarily removed from the popular global perception. That the United States and Europe, mainly the French President Nicholas Sarkozy, have engaged along humanitarian lines will be sufficient up until a point, but the lack of a clear and well enunciated goal will lead ineluctably to several tough, as of yet unasked queries.

The question raised in this context relate to the future role of NATO: whether to stick to letter of the UN resolutions or liberally interpret these UN resolutions with the intention to decapitate Qaddafi's regime and force his exit. If so, it is hard to avoid the possibility of using ground troops, which will justify the notions of some world leaders as to the true intentions of NATO and its allies.<sup>(11)</sup> Some observers remind us that although ground troops were never deployed in Kosovo (1998), the agreement to deploy them marked a unique milestone for NATO's efforts to halt Serbia's ethnic cleansing campaign. After intense air strikes on Serbia's power grid, Milosevic surrendered on June 3, 1998. That said, they argue, "NATO's reluctance to deploy ground troops and its preference for aerial bombing diluted the effectiveness of its campaign to halt the atrocities in Kosovo."<sup>(12)</sup>

On the contrary, we argue that NATO members must avoid the temptation of putting troops on the grounds, in large part because this move would risk getting NATO locked in taking military actions that

most likely exacerbate the conditions on the ground. The Libyan rebels' battle against their tyrannical regime must be supported by the international community but ultimately it has to be sorted out by the Libyans themselves much as the other Arab Spring revolts have been. This operation must be undertaken to support freedom and local rights, not simply to impose a solution or an occupation. While the status quo in Libya is no longer sustainable, it is important to avoid getting embroiled in yet another military adventure that could cause more harm than good.

### **THE FLAWS OF 'THE WAR ON TERROR'**

The September 11 attacks on United States and its aftermath have resurrected old fears, created new myths, and constructed enduring memories around the world. Among the many issues that these terrorist attacks brought to the fore, revolve around the fact that the September 11 attacks were not just a transient story, but rather they were more precisely rooted in a region filled with deep and widespread resentment toward U.S. foreign policy. For though it may be argued that the September 11 tragedy brought to mind horrifying images and the realities of terrorism; the messy and wantonly cruel Israeli policies toward the Palestinians in the occupied territories represented another chapter in the contested narrative about the struggle between the two nations. Just as the images of September 11 shaped the minds of many in America, so too, for many citizens of the Middle East, did the stories about the Jenin's massacre and Israeli collective punishment live in the memory of the Palestinians. The latter have increasingly been viewed in the Muslim world as the victims of Israeli aggression and occupation.

Several key questions persist: will the United States engage positively with the Muslim world and/or the Arab world in the post-September 11 era? What are many of the implications for the war in Afghanistan? How would the Israeli-Palestinian conflict affect this relationship? What are the pitfalls of not fully appreciating the degree to which the war against terror is political and diplomatic in nature, and not purely military? The answers to these questions will demonstrate the extent to which such memories shatter or reinforce the old myths or to create new ones.

## **HISTORY AND CONTEXT**

To better understand the war against in Afghanistan and its impact on the collective memory of the Afghan people, it is critical to put in perspective history and context. For many Afghans recent memory is replete with images of their country being used as a Cold War pawn in confrontations between the superpowers. Afghanistan has seen virtually continuous civil strife since the fall of the Mohammed Zher Shah monarchy in 1973. Violent ethnic uprisings have been constant in the country largely because of the failure of leaders to promote equitable policies and practices.<sup>(13)</sup>

Economically and socially devastated, Afghanistan has seen more than two decades of civil war, narcoterrorism, socio-political repression, and displaced people. From 1980 to 1989, Afghanistan was plunged into a countrywide resistance against some 100,000 Soviet troops who occupied the country.<sup>(14)</sup> The resistance was spearheaded and financed by Islamic groups, with the United States providing logistical and military support. Put differently, the United States, along with Saudi Arabia, helped create the first international

“jihad” to dislodge Soviet troops from Afghanistan.<sup>(15)</sup> During this period, over 5 million Afghans fled to neighboring countries of Pakistan and Iran. Well over a million people were killed in the fighting against the Russians, creating a large population of widows and female-headed household.<sup>(16)</sup>

When the Marxist government fell in 1992, the mojahadeen (freedom fighters) led by Burhaanuddin Rabbani, a Tajik, ruled until the Taliban faction overthrew him in 1996. The Taliban were a new ultra-conservative Islamic movement that returned Afghanistan to Pushtun rule. During the Taliban rule (1996-2001), thousands of combatants and civilians were killed, and the country experienced the most restricted social and political atmosphere, despite maintaining some semblance of order and stability. The Taliban created the largest displaced populations in the history of Afghanistan, making it extremely difficult, and at times even impossible, for relief organizations to operate.<sup>(17)</sup> The harassment of relief agencies, particularly on issues dealing with women’s health, safety, employment, and education, led to the abysmal living conditions for women and displaced.<sup>(18)</sup>

After providing arms and ammunitions to the mojahadeen, the United States abandoned Afghanistan in the aftermath of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. America gave its regional allies, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, a free hand to control the ensuing Afghan civil war, a development that gave rise to the emergence of new networks of terror and the spread of Wahhabism throughout the country.<sup>(19)</sup> The September 11th attacks in New York and Washington, demonstrated the degree to which such terror networks had established their operations in Afghanistan. The perils of walking away from Afghanistan have become obvious, given that the

international community must now live with the consequences. Making sense of the post-September 11th tragedy and how it has affected the relationships between the Muslim world and the United States on the one hand, and what this tragedy portends for the region's stability and social change requires an in-depth analysis of causes and consequences.

### **THE IRAN GAME**

In the past, the Bush administration failed to show any coherent policy toward Iran. During the war on Afghanistan, Iran provided U.S. forces much needed on the ground intelligence through third parties such as the Northern Alliance.<sup>(20)</sup> The post-Taliban era has seen tangible shifts in Iran's foreign policy. In the UN-sponsored talks in Bonn, Germany (December 4, 2001), on creating a broad-based government in Afghanistan, the Iranian representative fully cooperated in establishing an interim government. One might question the tactics of the administration on both moral and pragmatic grounds, but the lack of reciprocity contributes to the disingenuous attitude many Iranians see as manifesting in the US reaction to any given Iranian policy.

President George W. Bush's State of the Union address, in which he lumped together Iran, Iraq, and North Korea in an "axis of evil," substantially weakened the democratic movement in Iran, while strengthening the hands of the hard-liners representing the conservative establishment. The Israeli pressure on the Bush administration to contain Iran's drive for the atomic bomb has overestimated Iran's capabilities. Iran's outrage at the label of "the axis of evil" has further widened the gap between U.S.-Iran diplomatic

communities. Such rhetorical posturing reinforces the myth that while Islam in Bosnia represents a tolerant and “modern” Islam, Iran, Iraq, and Syria represent militant, exclusivist and intolerant Islam.<sup>(21)</sup> It is disconcerting that Iran, while going through nascent liberalization and democratization struggles received little to no consideration or rhetorical peace from the Bush administration. This is perhaps the best example of the potential extremist backlash a country in a fragile ideological battle domestically can face. Bush’s choice of aggressive rhetoric was particularly unfortunate and ultimately counterproductive.

The most visible part of U.S. foreign policy toward Iran has been its erratic shift. The Bush administration, which at one point considered Iran’s role in defeating the Taliban government “constructive,” accused Iran of trying to undermine the interim Afghan government of Hamid Karzai. Subsequently, it dropped the charge that Iran was intent on destabilizing Afghanistan; instead, it charged that the Islamic Republic is shielding al-Qaeda terrorists.<sup>(22)</sup> The Bush administration failed to come to grips with Iran’s legitimate interests in the region and the positive role it can play in the region’s overall stability.

Likewise, the Obama administration has made sanctions on Iran’s energy sector a central part of his strategy in dealing with Tehran. It is not clear that these sanctions will prove effective in mounting pressure on major players in the international energy industry to avoid doing business with Iran. The U.S. dual-track policy—keeping engagement as a possibility, while pushing for new sanctions—has thus far failed to generate a positive outcome. Turkey and Brazil have made one last attempt to revive the diplomatic initiative. The three countries (Iran, Turkey, and Brazil) signed a tripartite deal on May 17, 2010. The

package embraced many features from the original Geneva deal, including the transfer of Iran's low-enriched uranium to Turkey.<sup>(23)</sup>

In the meantime, the Obama administration turned its attention to sanction policy, working with Britain, France and Germany on measures to push for a sanction package. The result was the UN Security Council Resolution 1929, passed on June 9, 2010, with the final vote of 12 in favor, two opposed (Turkey and Brazil), and one abstention (Lebanon). Resolution 1929 required U.N. members to block the transfer of technology related to either missiles or nuclear weapons and to cut off commercial access to uranium mining or nuclear materials production in their territories. It also imposed new restrictions on travel by Iranian officials associated with proliferation. Moreover, it targeted Iranian shipping lines affiliated with Iran's Revolutionary Guards, and called on member states to refuse them financial and insurance services. Lastly, the Resolution called on member states to block new branches of certain Iranian banks in their territories.<sup>(24)</sup> What effects these measures will have on the Iranian leadership, and whether these sanctions will keep the diplomatic door ajar, remains to be seen.

## **THE PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION**

Since the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime, the U.S. foreign policy of democracy promotion in Iraq has met with colossal challenges, as hopes for the expansion of civil society, the rule of law, and political transition from authoritarianism have proven unrealistic. Different ethnic and sectarian drives have motivated the Shiites, the Sunni, and the Kurds. The expectation that democracy would rapidly alter Iraqi society has remained unreasonable, and the strategy that the

electoral process and elections would prove crucial in bridging sectarian gaps has been fraught with tensions. The subsequent Shiite revivalism has become a cause of concern for major Arab Sunni countries, such as Saudi Arabia, which has been worried that Iran could stir up their local kingdom's own Shiite minority.<sup>(25)</sup> Furthermore, these difficulties have raised a central question regarding the effectiveness of the military intervention in promoting democracy.<sup>(26)</sup>

A cursory look at the history of U.S. involvement in nation-building demonstrates why military conquest could not necessarily pave the way for social and political reform without the authorization of an international body, such as the United Nations. To be sure, U.S. nation-building operations have yielded some lucid successes (Japan, Germany, and Taiwan), some dismal failures (Haiti, Cuba, Vietnam, and Somalia), and some inconclusive results (Philippines and Kosovo).<sup>(27)</sup> The pitfalls encountered in previous rebuilding efforts in other places such as Bosnia, East Timor, and Afghanistan loom large. Lawlessness, poor oversight, and ethnic strife have rendered past rebuilding efforts precarious.<sup>(28)</sup> Some studies suggest that in only four countries—West Germany, Japan, Grenada, and Panama—did the types of democratic governance systems that the United States sought to establish continue after 10 years. In the cases of Haiti, Nicaragua, Cambodia, and Vietnam, tyrannical regimes quickly emerged after U.S. forces left the country. In Lebanon (in the early 1980s) and Somalia (in the early 1990s), U.S. nation-building efforts utterly failed.<sup>(29)</sup>

Historically, intervention, proxy wars, and occupation in the Middle East by great powers have been motivated by purely instrumental interests and political, not democratic, considerations.

One observer notes that America created violent and radical political Islam inadvertently as part of its Cold War strategy. In the Afghan war (1980-1989), America supported *mujahideen* (freedom fighters) to dislodge Soviet forces from Afghanistan. The jihadi *madrastas* (religious schools) in Pakistan trained both the Afghan refugee children who later helped form the Taliban regime and the Arab-Afghans who were later networked by al-Qaeda. The U.S. policymakers turned this ideological tendency (Islamism) into a political organization. The Afghan war gave it organization, numbers, skills, resources, and a coherent strategy. In short, “America created an infrastructure of terror but heralded it as an infrastructure of liberation.”<sup>(30)</sup>

The application of the lessons of U.S. occupation of Germany and Japan to Iraq is also problematic. One observer argues that these lessons will apply rather lightly to Iraq. The Germans and the Japanese were not part of any wider fellowship or nation, whereas Iraqis belong to a much larger Muslim global community in addition to their Arab identity. It is not difficult to understand why the invasion of Iraq is bound to enflame a new cycle of hatred among Muslims that can only benefit Islamic militants.<sup>(31)</sup>

Several factors and endowments rendered it possible for both Germany and Japan to become democracies. Prior to the outbreak of World War II, both Germany and Japan were highly industrialized countries with advanced level of economic development that generated impressive GNP per capita. They were both relatively homogenous ethnically, with a significant consensus about their sense of social solidarity and national identity. Both Germany and Japan emerged from World War II with state institutions intact. Both retained an effective police force, judicial system, and civil service

with which to govern.<sup>(32)</sup> Both had extensive experience with democratic rule prior to World War II and had committed leaders, whose embrace of the democratic project helped anchor democratic projects at home. Additionally, context-specific factors such as the experience of total devastation and defeat, the fear of Communist threat and takeover, and the imposed freedom of occupation bestowed by contemporary cultural norms made it possible for democracy to endure in these countries.<sup>(33)</sup>

These endowments crucial to democratic outcomes—levels of economic development, ethnic homogeneity, strength of state institutions, historical experience, and elite leadership—are factors conspicuously lacking in the case of Iraq. The cases that are better matched to Iraq in initial conditions are Haiti and Bosnia, both of which have yet to make a decisive turn toward being stable democracies with sustainable economic and political units.<sup>(34)</sup> The continuing violence and growing inter-communal strife over land, resources, and political power can slide the country into further chaos. A legitimate government, effective security forces, Sunni satisfaction that they would not be discriminated against in a Shiite-dominated Iraq, and thus a reduction in the Sunni support for the insurgency could prove to be keys to a functioning political regime in Iraq.<sup>(35)</sup>

The reversal of U.S. policy of democracy promotion in the region—due in large part to the failure of U.S. policy in Iraq—has given autocratic but pro-U.S. regimes in the Middle East an opportunity to reprieve from the pressure to democratize, as long as they support Washington in its—impending or future—confrontation with Iran, Syria, and Shiite Islamists. But more to the point, with the rising Shiite Iran, the Bush administration has muted its call for reform in the region by redirecting policy to re-embrace Sunni Arab

allies who typically run authoritarian regimes. To contain Iran, the United States is now reaching out to Saudi Arabia, other Persian Gulf states, Egypt, and Jordan, in the form of large arms deals and new talks on such issues as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is widely perceived in the Arab world as the greatest source of tension.<sup>(36)</sup>

### **ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT**

Coached in terms of evil vs. good, the rhetoric surrounding the war against terror has entered a new and potentially dangerous era of moral obfuscation. The projection of American moral principles and moral absolutes onto the rest of the world—as summarized in President George W. Bush’s address at the State of the Union that one is either with U.S. campaign against terror or is on the side of the evil—has caused frictions between the United States and its closest allies in the Europe, much less in the non-Western world. Discernible signs of a return to Cold War politics have increasingly become a cause of concern. Some observers of international politics argue that the Cold War paradigm of a world made up of evil people against good people is “not viable as an approach to this particular situation in a world characterized by far more nuanced relationships, and the complexities thereof.”<sup>(37)</sup>

With the Palestinian issue taking center stage of Middle Eastern politics, the Bush administration finds itself facing a major crisis, much broader and difficult to contain than the war in Afghanistan: supporting both a right-wing Israeli government of Ariel Sharon and the Palestinian legitimate aspirations and struggle for sovereignty. The fight against terror and the resistance to occupation are at danger of being profoundly confused, both rhetorically and practically. Since

the September 11, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Binyamin Netanyahu after have cynically exploited the broadly defined campaign against “terrorism,” using that as a cover for his continued failed policy against the Palestinians. Concentrating on the Jewish people tragedies and leaving out the plight of a dispossessed people without a state leads to moral blindness.<sup>(38)</sup> This is not to say that any one party has the monopoly on suffering, both the Jews and the Palestinians in the region retain a need for dignity, legitimacy of territory, and an entitlement to a full respect of their human rights. However, when one side is supported so heavily and without respect for its transgressors, one should not be substantially surprised when a group seeks out extra-governmental means to resolve its differences. The Palestinians, embodied in radical groups like Islamic Jihad or Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, are truly no different than the Yishuv, the Stern Gang in their focus, intensity, and use of violence to achieve political ends. The coin in both cases was a willingness to employ unorthodox means to achieve radical ends; it is disingenuous to validate one and vitiate the other.

## **SPREADING DEMOCRATIC VALUES AND ECONOMIC REFORM**

A global consensus is emerging that support for democracy and economic development are the most effective policy tools to fight terrorism. In this context, attempts at nation building in Afghanistan are seen as even more crucial and inescapable. One scholar points out that because of democratic deficit in the Middle East, the streets have become the political and emotional outlets for the masses. “Bin Laden speaks in the vivid language of popular Islamic preachers,” Dale F.

Eickelman writes, “and builds on a deep and widespread resentment against the West and local ruling elites identified with it. The lack of formal outlets to express opinion on public concerns has created the democracy deficit in much of the Arab world, and this makes it easier for terrorists such as bin Laden, asserting that they act in the name of religion, to hijack the Arab street.”<sup>(39)</sup>

A growing consensus is emerging that helping the region’s countries, such as Pakistan, educate their youth will not just eradicate the culture of violence by mitigating poverty and ignorance, but it will also advance the cause of long-run economic development.<sup>(40)</sup> As an antidote to Bin Laden the recent Arab revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, and the significant upheaval in Syria, Jordan, Bahrain, Yemen and Libya, serves as a potent counter-commentary to his argument. While Bin Laden continued to preach hate and violence under Islam, it was the street youth that called for peaceful protest and universal democratic ideals. In this vein, it seems that a pan-Arab identity, which accounts for a broad swath of religious, ethnic, and political within the Middle East better drives the protests movements in the Arab street.

## **INTERNAL MUSLIM STRUGGLES**

The Muslim world today faces new challenges. Foremost among these challenges the rising awareness and connection with marketplace of ideas. Contrary to what Samuel Huntington called “clash of civilizations,” the real clash in today’s Muslim world is emblematic of an intra-civilizational tension.<sup>(41)</sup> The “clash of civilizations” paradigm is much too simplistic to account for the complex dynamics of change in the Muslim world since the 1990s.<sup>(42)</sup> Furthermore, cultural

differences, as Stephen M. Walt posits, do not cause war by themselves, just as cultural similarities do not guarantee peaceful coexistence.<sup>(43)</sup> In a recent essay, Huntington reiterates his civilizational war thesis, arguing that the makings of a general clash of civilizations exist. “Reactions to September 11 and the American response,” he argues, “were strictly along civilizational lines.”<sup>(44)</sup>

Huntington bases his judgment on the sympathetic and supportive reactions of the Western world in the fight against terror, but disregards the repeated assertion by President Bush and coalition members that the war on terrorism is not a war against Islam or against the Muslims. Likewise, bin Laden’s call for holy war against the United States has fallen on deaf ears in much of the Muslim world. The hijackers of September 11 hardly represent the millions of Muslims who favor participation in the global economy as equals. There are, however, many anti-globalists in the Muslim world, just as elsewhere, who fear uncertainties associated with globalization. Some observers have argued that the Hebron crowd that danced in the streets in the aftermath of September 11 consisted overwhelmingly of people pushed by modern technologies to the fringes of the global economy.<sup>(45)</sup> The economic grievances, Timur Kuran insists, that contribute to Muslim resentment of the global economic order have cultural and religious dimensions. The solutions must be found in economic development and cultural repair.<sup>(46)</sup>

Huntington’s account fails to grasp the diversity within both the Muslim world and the West. Consider, for example, the lack of consensus in the Western world regarding the label “axis of evil” used by President Bush referring to Iran, Iraq, and North Korea, as well as the political frictions between the United States and its European allies on how to remove Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Some scholars have warned against the reductionism of focusing primarily on religion as the main cause of conflicts between Muslim and Christian communities. “There are many perspectives in the Muslim community,” J. Dudley Woodberry points out, “and even these are changing, and conflicts between Muslim and Christian communities in places like Indonesia and Sudan have ethnic, economic, and political, as well as religious, roots.”<sup>(47)</sup> The Muslim world has, in recent years, seen rising and encouraging voices of moderation, religious tolerance, democratic social movements, and human rights. Arguing that the United States could benefit from supporting the call for open society and the rule of law in the Muslim world, one observer cautions that “it will be highly imprudent, even reckless, to treat the Middle East and neighboring Muslim societies, with a population of half a billion, merely in terms of their available energy resources and strategic values.”<sup>(48)</sup>

In the post-Cold War era, the Muslim world has seen an internal struggle regarding the role of Islam in public life, where forces of changes and continuity have clashed with those of the status quo. This struggle has taken the form of a self-critical approach in the aftermath of the September 11th tragedy, becoming in the process a struggle for the soul of the Muslims. At the heart of this political and cultural struggle lies two key questions: Whose Islam? And what Islam? The first question has to do with who should lead or decide in Islamic societies: elected or unelected officials? The second question concerns the issue of whether or not restore past doctrines and laws or reinterpret and reformulate laws in light of the new realities of contemporary society.<sup>(49)</sup> The real story is if and when this trend will lay the groundwork for a Muslim Reformation, a development whose encouragement should be an important objective of U.S. policy.<sup>(50)</sup>

The Obama administration was wise to allow the Arab protestors to wrests authority from their autocracies, although his support and that of his regime could have come much sooner and with greater force. However, the deficit of dignity in the Middle East has become palpable; the Arab street feels monopolized by foreign interests and abused; so this did indeed need to become a revolution for Arabs, by Arabs, whatever the outcome. This description is perhaps to simplistic observers in Israel might be as quick to declare the revolts a normative good, worrying instead perniciously about their own security rather than the dignity of the region. The United States as well could have placed its oil interests over the issues of the people; the Obama administration was wise to stay clear of this prospect and instead back democracy over profit.

The region now faces a war of ideas that must be waged from within. Al-Jazeera (Arabic for “the peninsula”), the independent, all-Arab television news network based in Qatar, has popularized the investigative reporting and freedom of information around the Muslim/Arab world in the events following the September 11th and the subsequent war waged in Afghanistan. The official logo of Al-Jazeera, *al-rai wa rai al-akar* (the opinion and the opposite opinion) has virtually become a political slogan for many Arabs, who favor anchoring wide-ranging ideas and discussing them peacefully.<sup>(51)</sup> Its impact on the struggle for free press and public opinion in the Arab world has been drastically visible. For the first time the Arab public is getting a taste of free press and free journalism.<sup>(52)</sup>

The September 11th tragedy also vividly illustrated that the growth of Islamic radicalism poses a huge threat to the existing Middle Eastern regimes and leaders. Hence the Saudi’s peace initiative amid the intensification of the second *Intifada*, and hence the

argument that U.S. public diplomacy should foster genuine avenues for political participation that would create space for moderate and reform-minded Muslim leaders, scholars, lawyers, and journalists and other beleaguered liberals to freely express their views.<sup>(53)</sup> The policy of supporting democratic movements and regimes offers not only better prospects for stability, but also long-run credibility to the U.S. foreign policy in the region.

## CONCLUSION

The flaws of the so-called “the war on terror” are many and varied. The counter-narrative of peaceful democratic change, by contrast, offers an attractive option. The U.S. position of supporting political reforms will have a dual purpose: it will contain future political instabilities in the region; but more importantly, it can and will successfully reduce the capabilities of terrorist groups and organizations—both financially and socially—to operate and recruit. Al Qaeda was caught unaware by these uprisings, it is not as if they supported the regimes under attack, they had criticisms of all secularist and religious regimes in the region, but to their dismay the peaceful protest seemed to vindicate non-violence, with greater political achievements being made in four months than in all the years Al Qaeda, since 1979, has been working toward their vaunted fourth caliphate.

Getting dragged into a ground war or military intervention for the sake of imposing democracy from the top is problematic and counterproductive. The case of Libya and the establishment of “no-fly zone” have invited as much support as controversy around the world. Regardless, the triumph of a peaceful popular movement to rid

Egypt of its longtime autocrat, Hosni Mubarak, has been a nightmare for the groups such as al-Qaeda and its likes. For the United States this should be a time of great promise for the continuing, widely praised “campaign against terror,” but only through diplomacy and human rights promotion can the final goal of a safer world be reached. One obvious point is that it is not enough simply to bludgeon enemies into submission. To no avail, the United States has attempted these strong arms tactics since September 11<sup>th</sup>, while this policy was described by many as folly and a machismo driven foreign policy, for our belief it took the old Napoleonic axiom of “... nothing succeeding like success” to bring the United States more in line with a reasonable policy. Continued support for reforms in the Arab world, the promotion of human rights, and the application of even-handed policies will sustain this drive toward a more stable, better governed Middle East. ❖

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