

Noble Rhetoric Supports Democracy While Ignoble Policies Support Repression

By Stephen Zunes | November 17, 2003

Introduction

President George W. Bush's November 6 speech before the National Endowment for Democracy emphasizing the need for greater democracy and freedom in the Arab world, while containing a number of positive aspects, was nevertheless very misleading and all-too characteristic of the long-standing contradictory messages that have plagued U.S. policy in the Middle East.

On the positive side, President Bush challenged the racist mythology that Islamic societies were somehow incapable of democracy and recognized that greater political pluralism need not follow a U.S. model. Yet he failed even once to say a critical word about any non-democratic U.S. ally in the region. It is noteworthy, for example, that he called for spreading freedom "from Damascus to Tehran" but not from Riyadh to Cairo.

President Bush praised Morocco for recently allowing for relatively competitive parliamentary elections, but said nothing about the regime's ongoing savage repression in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. His praise for reforms in the U.S.-backed sultanates in Bahrain and Oman ignored ongoing suppression of peaceful demonstrators, unfair trials, the use of torture by security services and the jailing of political dissidents.

In citing the enormous poverty and political repression in the Middle East, President Bush correctly observed that, "These are not the failures of a culture or a religion. These are the failures of political and economic doctrines." However, some of the most damaging doctrines have come from the United States. For example, the neoliberal economic doctrines imposed by the United States on a number of Middle Eastern countries in return for foreign aid or the restructuring of debts have in many cases actually increased poverty and in virtually every case greatly exacerbated economic inequality. Similarly, through

the Truman Doctrine and Eisenhower Doctrine to the Carter Doctrine, Reagan Doctrine, and Bush Doctrine, U.S. policy has propped up scores of repressive regimes against their own people through large-scale military, financial, and diplomatic support.

President Bush's review of history was also incredibly misleading. He referred to worldwide trends in democratization that began in the 1970s, when "Portugal and Spain and Greece held free elections. Soon, there were new democracies in Latin America and free institutions were spreading in Korea and Taiwan and in East Asia." What the president failed to mention was that the United States was a major supporter of the Portuguese, Spanish, and Greek dictatorships, as well as dictatorial regimes in Taiwan, South Korea, and Latin America, thereby retarding their long-overdue transitions to democracy.

President Bush even claimed that the United States, particularly under President Ronald Reagan, was somehow responsible for these democratic trends in that the U.S. "created the conditions in which new democracies could flourish." In reality, during this period the United States sent more military and police aid to more dictatorships than any other nation.

He cited "the difficult battles of Korea and Vietnam" as examples of Americans' willingness to "sacrifice for liberty," even though Syngman Rhee's regime in South Korea and Nguyen Van Thieu's



regime in South Vietnam, for which U.S. forces were fighting, were actually brutal military dictatorships.

Such mythology was used as backdrop to President Bush's claim that the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq was for "the peace of Iraq and for the security of free nations." Despite growing opposition to the U.S. occupation within Iraq and around the world, and demands that the United States quickly turn administration of the country over to the United Nations or to the Iraqis themselves, President Bush claimed that any failure of the U.S. mission "would embolden terrorists around the world and increase dangers to the American people and extinguish the hopes of millions in the region."

In reality, Amnesty International recently reported, "Since the rhetoric about war in Iraq began, and through the war itself, human rights have suffered significantly worldwide" and that "the politics around the war have ensnared millions of people, rendering them pawns as relationships between nations were forged into new strategic alliances." In announcing its 2003 human rights report, Amnesty reported, "While the overthrow of Saddam Hussein has brought greater freedom for the Iraqi people, the politics and distraction of the war in Iraq have had unintended, negative consequences for millions of people worldwide."

In what some segments of the media have indicated may be a significant shift in policy, President Bush stated that,

"Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe, because in the long run stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty. As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export... . Therefore the United States has adopted a new policy: a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East."

Few people familiar with the Middle East could disagree with his observation that support for dictatorial regimes has not led to greater stability. However, there are no indications that the Bush administration is planning to stop its support for governments that

deny freedom or otherwise promote freedom in the region.

It is hypocritical in the extreme to state that "Many Middle Eastern governments now understand that military dictatorship and theocratic rule are a straight, smooth highway to nowhere, but some governments still cling to the old habits of central control" when the United States is the primary backer of such regimes in the region.

It is worth looking briefly at the reality of U.S. policy in the Middle East from the perspective of human rights and democracy.

U.S. Support for Repression in the Middle East

Rampant double standards have long plagued U.S. policy in the Middle East. American officials roundly condemned Iraqi repression of its Kurdish minority (at least after the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait) while, just to the north, the United States has armed Turkish forces in their repression of Turkey's Kurdish minority. Strict enforcement of reactionary interpretations of Islamic law by Iranian authorities are highlighted as examples of the perfidy of that regime, while even more draconian measures enacted in Saudi Arabia are downplayed or even rationalized as inherently part of their culture. The right of self-determination for Kuwaiti Arabs while under Iraqi occupation was vigorously defended, but not the right of Palestinian Arabs under Israeli occupation or Sahrawi Arabs under Moroccan occupation. Martial law in NATO ally Turkey during the 1980s was largely supported even as martial law in the Warsaw Pact nation of Poland during that same period was strongly condemned and resulted in U.S. sanctions.

Despite Bush administration efforts to highlight repression in Iran, it is noteworthy that the United States was responsible for the overthrow of that country's secular democratic government in 1953 and armed and trained the Shah's brutal secret police for the next quarter century. The United States even quietly supported Saddam Hussein's brutal regime during the 1980s, the height of the Iraqi dictator's repression.

U.S. aid to Israel and Morocco has generally increased as these governments' repression in their occupied territories has worsened. The United States largely welcomed the 1992 military coup in Algeria that nullified that country's first democratic elections, even as it led to a bloody civil war. American forces failed to stop widespread repression, even lynchings, of Palestinian residents of Kuwait immediately after the country's liberation from Iraq.

Rather than encourage democratization in the Middle East, the United States has reduced—or maintained at low levels—its economic, military, and diplomatic support of Arab countries that have experienced substantial liberalization in recent years. For example, Jordan received large-scale U.S. support in the 1970s and 1980s despite widespread repression and authoritarian rule. In the early 1990s, when it became perhaps the most democratic country in the Arab world—with a relatively free press, opposition political parties, and lively debate in a parliament that wielded real political power within a constitutional monarchy—the United States suspended foreign aid. Similarly, aid to Yemen was cut off within months of the newly reunified country's first democratic election in 1990. By contrast, American support for dictatorial regimes—such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the smaller Gulf emirates—increased during this period.

Rather than disliking American democracy, most Middle Easterners are envious of it and are resentful that the American attitude seems to be that they are somehow not deserving of it. It is ironic that the anti-terrorist coalition the United States has built for its military response to the September 2001 attacks—centered on alliances with the absolute monarchy in Saudi Arabia, the military regime of Pakistan, and the crypto-Communists that rule Uzbekistan—was labeled “Operation Enduring Freedom.”

Before taking seriously any claims that the United States is really interested in freedom in that part of the world, it is appropriate to look at some of the specific countries the United States considers its allies:

Case #1: Saudi Arabia and the Gulf:

One of the many ironies in U.S. Middle East policy is that a nation founded in one of the world's first republican revolutions is now the major backer of one of the world's few remaining absolute monarchies. For the past twenty years, the United States has been on record that it is willing to use military force to repel not just external aggression against U.S. allies in the Gulf, but internal challenges as well. There is little question that U.S. economic and military support has kept the hereditary rulers of the Middle East in power as despots far longer than a more natural evolution of social change would have otherwise allowed.

Indeed, the most important American ally in the Islamic world is the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which is run exclusively by a royal family that allows no public dissent or independent press. Those who dare challenge the regime or its policies are punished severely. There is no constitution, no political parties, and no legislature. It was under such an environment of repression that Osama bin Laden and most of his followers first emerged.

The United States has helped perpetuate the rule of absolute monarchs in the Persian Gulf through billions of dollars in military sales and generous arrangements for economic investments. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, has demonstrated outright hostility toward democratic trends in neighboring Yemen—the only republic on the Arabian Peninsula—with no apparent American objections.

Support for these family dictatorships has been a prevailing theme of U.S. policy for several decades, a view shared by the British when they were the dominant outside power. According to Harold Macmillan, who served as prime minister in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it is “rather sad that circumstances compel us to support reactionary and really rather outmoded regimes because we know that the new forces, even if they begin with moderate opinions, always seem to drift into violent revolutionary and strongly anti-Western positions.” More bluntly, F. Gregory Gause III, a contemporary specialist on Saudi Arabia at the University of Vermont, notes that, “The truth is the more democratic the Saudis become, the less

cooperative they will be with us. So why should we want that?”

British-based journalist and author Dilip Hiro describes how the United States does not support democracy in the Middle East because “it is much simpler to manipulate a few ruling families—to secure fat orders for arms and ensure that oil price remains low—than a wide variety of personalities and policies bound to be thrown up by a democratic system.” In particular, says Hiro, elected governments might reflect the popular sentiment for “self-reliance and Islamic fellowship.”

Case #2: Uzbekistan and Central Asia:

In recent years, the United States has rationalized its support for autocratic regimes in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia as a regrettable but necessary means of suppressing the Islamic opposition. In many respects, this policy closely parallels the decades of support during the cold war of repressive, right-wing governments in the name of anti-Communism. The result is similar, however: the lack of open political expression only encourages large segments of the oppressed populations to ally with an underground—and often violent and authoritarian—opposition movement.

Ironically, in some cases, such as Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, the United States has even allied with old-line Communist Party bosses from the Soviet era who are still in power as a means of countering the growth of Islamic movements in those countries. (This contrasts with previous decades, when the United States supported such Islamic movements to counter the Communists.) This comes despite the fact that, in part because of the strong Sufi influence, most Islamic movements in Central Asia—with the notable exception of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)—are actually fairly progressive and moderate as compared with some of their Middle Eastern and North African counterparts.

In the case of Uzbekistan, the United States’ closest ally in the region, the radical orientation of its Islamic opposition is a direct result the Karimov regime’s imprisonment and torture of nonviolent

Muslims who dared to worship outside of state controls. Attacks by the dictatorship’s armed forces against the IMU have resulted in widespread civilian casualties, not just within Uzbekistan, but also in neighboring Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Amnesty International has documented widespread human rights violations during the 2001 counter-insurgency campaign, where “villages were set on fire and bombed, livestock were killed, houses and fields destroyed.” However, the U.S. State Department saw the Karimov regime’s actions quite differently, declaring “The United States supports the right of Uzbekistan to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity from the violent actions of the IMU, and commends the measures in the course of the current incursions to minimize casualties and ensure the protection of innocent civilians.”

Case #3: Egypt:

The United States has traditionally justified its support for authoritarian regimes on the grounds that the alternatives would be worse: during the cold war, the fear was from forces of the left and, more recently, it is the fear of anti-American Islamists. However, the United States is also quite willing to support Middle Eastern governments that suppress liberal democratic movements.

A particularly vivid example of this lack of concern for democracy involves Egypt, by far the largest Arab country. In May 2001, the increasing authoritarianism of U.S.-backed dictator Hosni Mubarak was demonstrated in the quick conviction of Dr. Saad El-Din Ibrahim and twenty-seven associates in what was widely seen as a serious blow against Egypt’s burgeoning pro-democracy movement. Dr. Ibrahim and his colleagues served with the Ibn Khaldun Center for Developmental Studies, a think tank dedicated to the promotion of civil society in Egypt and throughout the Arab world. In 2000, the Egyptian government shut down this internationally renowned center, known for its study of applied social sciences in Egypt and the Arab world. Its monthly publication, *Civil Society*, had been an important source of information and analysis for scholars across the globe. The Center had also monitored elections and provided workshops in civic education. Though the harsh sen-

tences were eventually overturned, the closure of the center and the jailing of its staff was clearly intended to deter other academics from pursuing similar research and related activities, thereby limiting the free exchange of ideas crucial to advancing political pluralism in Egypt and other Arab countries.

The convictions were part of a series of repressive government measures against Egyptian scholars, democrats, and human rights activists, as well as gays and feminists. The Ibn Khaldun Center advocated just the kind of liberal democratic values that U.S. foreign policy supposedly upholds, yet there was no threatened cutoff or reduction in U.S. foreign aid, on which the Egyptian regime is very dependent, or other direct pressure from the United States.

Egypt's corrupt and autocratic government is the second-largest recipient of U.S. economic and military assistance in the world, surpassed only by Israel. Concerns of pro-democracy groups in Egypt and human rights organizations in the United States that such aid is only making further repression possible has been rejected by the State Department, that still insists such aid is necessary to "push the peace march forward." As long as the Mubarak regime knows that U.S. aid will flow regardless of its violations of internationally recognized human rights, there is little incentive for political liberalization. The growing anti-American sentiment in Egypt stems not as much from U.S. support for Israel as it does from U.S. support for Mubarak's dictatorial rule.

Case #4: Turkey:

Turkey has struggled to build democratic institutions despite the constant threats from its military to take over the government, as it has on several previous occasions in the past with U.S. support. The Bush administration has at best mixed feelings about Turkish democracy. After the Turkish government balked at U.S. requests to support the invasion of Iraq, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, in a speech before Turkish cadets, hinted that the military might need to take unilateral action since the civilian government made a "big, big mistake" in failing to back U.S. military plans and that the demo-

cratically elected parliament "didn't quite know what it was doing."

For over fifty years, the Turkish republic has received large-scale military, economic, and diplomatic support from the United States. At NATO's southeastern flank, Turkey's strategic location relative to both the former Soviet Union and the Middle East made that country, after Israel and Egypt, the largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid—primarily military—in recent decades. Direct grants of armaments were phased out only as recently as 1998; arms sales to and ongoing strategic cooperation with Turkey continues.

Turkey has yet to acknowledge its genocide against its Armenian population over eighty years ago, in which over one million civilians were slaughtered. In order to please its Turkish client, the U.S. government has refused to publicly acknowledge that the genocide even took place, despite the widespread historic documentation of the atrocities.

In 1974, Turkish troops, armed with American weapons, seized the northern 40% of the island nation of Cyprus and engaged in a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the ethnic Greek population. As many as 2,000 civilians were killed. The United Nations Security Council condemned the invasion and called for Turkey's immediate withdrawal. However, the United States blocked the imposition of international sanctions to force the Turks to pull out. Congress immediately cut off aid to Turkey in response to the invasion and occupation, but aid was restored three years later after strong pressure from President Jimmy Carter on the grounds that a resumption of aid would make it easier to convince the Turks to withdraw. Decades later, however, Turkish troops remain, still occupying much of the northern part of the country—now declared an independent Turkish Cypriot state but not recognized by any country besides Turkey—and the island remains divided.

The Greek Cypriots are not the only victims of U.S.-backed Turkish armed forces. The fifteen million strong Kurdish minority, located primarily in the eastern part of the country, has suffered enormously under Turkish rule. There have been periods when simply speaking the Kurdish language or celebrating

Kurdish festivals has been severely repressed. In addition to being denied basic cultural and political rights, Kurdish civilians have been the primary victims of a Turkish counter-insurgency campaign ostensibly targeted at the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), a Marxist-led guerrilla group fighting for greater autonomy. The Turkish regime capitalized on the PKK's use of terrorism as an excuse to crush even nonviolent expressions of Kurdish nationalism. The United States has been largely silent regarding the Turkish government's repression but quite vocal in condemning what it sees as Kurdish terrorism.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the United States supplied Turkey with \$15 billion worth of armaments as the Turkish military carried out widespread attacks against civilian populations in the largest use of American weapons by non-U.S. forces since Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Most of this took place during President Bill Clinton's first term. Over 3,000 Kurdish villages were destroyed and over two million Kurds became refugees in an operation where more than three-quarters of the weapons were of U.S. origin. Human Rights Watch, which has also criticized the PKK rebels for serious human rights violations, has documented how the U.S.-supplied Turkish army was "responsible for the majority of forced evacuations and destruction of villages." The fifteen-year war cost over 40,000 lives.

Such pandering to the Turkish government was rationalized during the cold war as necessary to back a key ally that bordered the Soviet Union. Today, while this veneer is gone, the policy continues.

Case #5: Israel

Israel has by far the strongest democratic institutions of any country in the Middle East. Unfortunately, such respect for individual freedom and human rights is largely restricted to areas within its internationally recognized borders and primarily to its Jewish citizens. Indeed, Israeli occupation forces in the Palestinian-populated West Bank and Gaza Strip are perpetrating some of the worst human rights violations taking place in the Middle East today, with the unconditional backing of the Bush administration.

For the past decade, the United States has been virtually the only country to claim that the Geneva Convention pertaining to conduct by occupying powers does not apply to Israel. The United States also boycotted a recent meeting of the Fourth Geneva Convention at which Israel was reprimanded by 114 states—including Great Britain and other EU nations—for its "grave breaches" of the Geneva Convention, including indiscriminate and disproportionate use of violence against Palestinian civilians, among others.

Over the past thirty-five years, the United States has been one of only three dissenting votes in the General Assembly criticizing Israeli human rights at least six times and one of only two dissenting votes at least eight times. In the Security Council, the United States has been the sole dissenting vote, thereby vetoing resolutions critical of Israeli human rights violations, on at least eighteen occasions.

The United States has repeatedly blocked attempts by the United Nations to bring in unarmed human rights monitors or investigative committees into the occupied territories and has even vetoed resolutions criticizing Israeli killings of United Nations personnel.

Since the right-wing Prime Minister Ariel Sharon came to power in February 2001, Israeli human rights abuses have increased further. The Israeli government has dispatched assassination squads, ranging from individuals with rifles to U.S.-supplied helicopter gun ships with missiles, to attack Palestinians. Some of these Palestinians have been wanted terrorists associated with radical Islamic groups responsible for the murder of Israeli civilians. Others have been civilian political leaders of Islamic organizations, members of left-wing groups, activists in the ruling Fatah party, and some for no apparent reason. One target was a teacher at a Catholic school who had been working closely with Israeli teachers on developing a joint conflict resolution curriculum. There have also been a number of innocent bystanders killed as well. Princeton international law professor Richard Falk, an American Jew who served on a fact-finding commission dispatched to the occupied territories at the behest of the United Nations General Assembly during the winter of 2001, expressed criticism at Israel's "seemingly random hit list." The commission

noted that such assassinations “are grave breaches of the Fourth Geneva Convention, Article 147, and of international humanitarian law.” Nevertheless, both Democratic and Republican congressional leaders have gone on record supporting the Israeli assassination squads.

As the uprisings continued, the Palestinian resistance escalated to include armed attacks by Palestinian militiamen against Israeli occupation forces and settlers as well as terrorist attacks by extremist Islamic groups against Israeli settlers and against civilians inside Israel. Israeli repression increased as well, including killings of scores of Palestinian paramedics and other medical workers seeking to rescue the wounded in riots. In December 2001, the United States vetoed a UN Security Council resolution strongly condemning Palestinian terrorism because it also criticized Israeli policies of assassinating Palestinian dissidents and imposing collective punishment against civilian populations. The United States was the only dissenter within the 15-member world body.

During Israel’s April 2002 offensive, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Mary Robinson, reiterated her call for an end of the suicide bombings as well as an end to the occupation. She particularly criticized the Israelis for placing 600,000 Palestinians under a strict curfew for most of the month and the destruction of Palestinian medical, religious, and service institutions in contravention of international law, as well as the use of Palestinian civilians as human shields. Robinson, a former president of Ireland, had been one of the most visible and effective commissioners in the history of the UN’s Human Rights Committee. In response to her criticisms of America’s most important Middle East ally, however, the United States—which has veto power over the re-appointment of top UN officials—forced her to step down at the end of her term.

On the same day as President Bush’s speech before the National Endowment for Democracy, a United Nations special committee investigating Israeli practices in the occupied territories reported that Israeli human rights abuses has reached an all-time high. Despite this, Congress has twice voted to increase

military aid to Sharon’s government in recent months, effectively rewarding Israel for its repression.

Consequences of U.S. Policy:

Until the extent of the repression and the American complicity in the repression is recognized, it will be difficult to understand the negative sentiments a growing number of ordinary people in the Islamic world have toward the United States. Therefore, self-righteous claims by American leaders that the anger expressed by Arabs and Muslims toward the United States is because of “our commitment to freedom” only exacerbates feelings of ill-will and feeds the rage manifested in anti-American violence and terrorism.

To those in the Arab and Islamic world, U.S. defense of Israeli repression against their Palestinian brethren is perhaps the most sensitive of a whole series of grievances regarding American callousness toward internationally recognized human rights in the Middle East. Yet it is the U.S. support of repression by regimes of Islamic countries that Muslims know the best. Morocco and Turkey, like Israel, have utilized American weapons in the occupation and repression of other peoples. Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and other Islamic countries have suffered under autocratic rule maintained, in varying degrees, through American military, economic, and diplomatic support.

However, to link arms transfers with the human rights records of America’s Middle East allies, for example, would lead to the loss of tens of billions of dollars worth of sales for American arms manufacturers, which are among the most powerful special interest groups in Washington. With the exception of Israel, none of America’s allies in the region could really be considered democracies, yet none require democratic institutions in order to fulfill American strategic objectives. Most observers acknowledge that close strategic cooperation with the United States tends to be unpopular in Arab countries, as are government policies that devote large amounts of public expenditures to the acquisition of weapons, most of which are of American origin. Were these leaders subjected to the will of the majority, they would likely be

forced to greatly reduce arms purchases from and strategic cooperation with the United States.

In short, democracy among Middle Eastern countries is seen as potentially damaging to American policy goals. At the same time, now that administration claims of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and links to al Qaeda are widely recognized as false, support for democracy is one of the few rationales the administration has left for its invasion and occupation of Iraq. Whether this will indeed force the U.S. government to change its policies remains to be seen. As long as misleading statements regarding the U.S. commitment to democracy, as those in President Bush's November 6 address, remain unchallenged, such a change will be very unlikely.

(Stephen Zunes is an associate professor of Politics at the University of San Francisco and the author of Tinderbox: U.S. Middle East Policy and the Roots of Terrorism (Common Courage Press).)

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