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AFTER NEARLY two years of disasters since the U.S. invaded Iraq, the Bush administration is now claiming some success in its efforts to reshape the Middle East. The claims are based on elections in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Palestinian Territories; mass protests in Lebanon (the so-called “Cedar Revolution”) demanding that Syria withdraw and new elections be held; limited elections in Saudi Arabia; and finally, a promise by Egyptian president Mubarak that he will permit a contested presidential election in 2006. Bush and his acolytes claim credit for this seeming sweep of democratization across a region scarred with authoritarian rule.¹

Neocon ideologue Charles Krauthammer could barely contain himself:

Two years ago, shortly before the invasion of Iraq, I argued in these pages that forcefully deposing Saddam Hussein was, more than anything, about America “coming ashore” to effect a “pan-Arab reformation”—a dangerous, “risky and, yes, arrogant” but necessary attempt to change the very culture of the Middle East, to open its doors to democracy and modernity.

The Administration went ahead with this great project knowing it would be hostage to history. History has begun to speak.

Bush used his radio address to promote the new White House line on the second anniversary of the war: “The victory of freedom in Iraq,” he claimed, “is...inspiring democratic reformers from Beirut to Tehran.”²

That the likes of Bush and Krauthammer would claim vindication was predictable. But much more disturbing was the host of liberals who began to jump on the Bush’s democracy bandwagon. John Stewart, host of Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show* (arguably the most consistent Bush critic with a mass audience) wondered: “What if Bush...has been right about this all along? I feel like my world view will not sustain itself and I may...implode.” National Public Radio’s Daniel Schorr, who was at one time an independent enough journalist to have made Nixon’s enemies list, remarked that Bush “may have had it right.”³ Whatever one’s position on the invasion of Iraq, ran the new bipartisan conventional wisdom, everyone had to rejoice in the new process of democratization. It should be easy for those in the antiwar movement to dismiss all this as self-serving claptrap. But it isn’t, if for no other reason than the antiwar movement has been in political retreat since Bush’s reelection. If hundreds of thousands of people who demonstrated against the war were shocked when Bush carried it out anyway, and then were demoralized that millions of their fellow Americans voted to reelect Bush, it’s not hard to see that they would be ready to throw in the towel now that people in the Middle East appear to be rallying around Bush.

With many antiwar organizations dominated by liberals who often exude a paternalistic “white man’s burden” view towards Iraqis, the notion that “we” should bring the benefits of democracy to Iraq is (or the negative version of this—we “can’t leave” Iraq until we fix the mess we’ve made and make sure the country doesn’t fall into civil war or succumb to Islamic “fanaticism”), at least, widely tolerated in the ranks of the antiwar movement. As a result, many activists today are left confused with the turn of events since the Iraqi elections.

That’s is why it is crucial to understand *what is* and *what is not* happening in the Middle East—and in Washington, for that matter. In Washington, from the White House on down, “democracy” is just the latest justification for the war after all the other ones—disarming Saddam, preventing weapons of mass destruction from falling into terrorist hands, punishing Saddam for links to al-Qaeda—have run their course or have been shown to be lies. The coordinated public relations campaign around the “spreading of democracy” in the Middle East revealed the desperation of a

pro-war establishment intent on reconquering ideological ground lost to an occupation gone awry. In that sense, Bush's crowing about democracy was the latest "Mission Accomplished" moment.

What *isn't* happening is a genuine opening to democracy under U.S. sponsorship. First, some of the examples of "democratization" cited in Bush's litany of progress barely qualify. The Saudi municipal council elections held in February, in which only men could vote, chose one-half of councilors. The monarchy appointed the other half. The widely touted concession from Egypt's government allowing multi-candidate presidential elections permits only candidates from parties the parliament vets. Since the parliament is a rubber-stamp assembly controlled by President Hosni Mubarak's National Democratic Party, Mubarak will be able, in effect, to choose his opponents in the plebiscitary election scheduled for next year. The nation's largest opposition party, the Muslim Brotherhood, is prevented from running candidates under its own name. The Saudi and Egyptian reforms are "little more than window dressing."⁴

Second, Bush is highly selective in determining which countries he highlights to be part of his democratic wave. In general, U.S. allies in the "war on terror" receive carte blanche to repress their domestic opponents. They are exempt from U.S. pressure to democratize. This exemption certainly applies to the Pakistani dictator General Pervez Musharraf and to the one-party dictatorships in Central Asia (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan) that now play host to a ring of U.S. military bases. Ben Ali's dictatorship of Tunisia has received a green light from Washington to continue its repression of suspected al-Qaeda affiliates. In the Gulf emirate of Bahrain, the headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, tens of thousands of the country's Shiite majority have protested the U.S. troop presence in growing numbers since the emir undercut a move to reform when he proclaimed himself king in 2002. On March 27, 2005, 80,000 defied a government ban on their demonstration to demand that all positions in the national assembly, where currently one-half of representatives are royal appointees, be elected. The movement for democracy in the kingdom united Shiite religious, Left, and Arab nationalists. The country's Sunni minority rulers have put down the protests with massive repression, and the U.S. has had little to say about these attacks on democratic expression.⁵ The U.S. has also tried to pressure the government of Qatar to crack down on one true force for democratic discussion in the Arab world in recent years, the satellite network Al Jazeera.

Moreover, a review of the most prominent cases of U.S.-sponsored "democratization" in the region shows that rhetoric and reality don't match up.

Iraq

The January 30 elections in Iraq—which the U.S. at first opposed and then acquiesced to under mass pressure—were hardly textbook example of democracy in action. "With all the hoopla, it is easy to forget that this was an extremely troubling and flawed 'election.' Iraq is an armed camp. There were troops and security checkpoints everywhere. Vehicle traffic was banned," wrote Middle East expert Juan Cole. "The Iraqis did not know the names of the candidates for whom they were supposedly voting. What kind of an election is anonymous! There were even some angry politicians late last week who found out they had been included on lists without their permission."⁶

For months, until early April, the Iraqi constituent assembly elected January 30 hadn't been able to form a government, causing millions of Iraqis to lose any hope they may have had about the new government's prospects. Ethnic divisions—particularly those related to potentially explosive conflicts between Kurds, Turkmen, and Arabs in the city of Kirkuk—prevented the seating of a constituent assembly.

Indeed the U.S. deliberately structured the elections to encourage the political division of Iraq by religious and ethnic identity—thus ensuring the kind of divisions that would make a unified national resistance against the occupation more difficult.

Even with a new government in place, the U.S. has already made sure that it won't have power to decide the most fundamental questions facing the country. Before the Coalition Provisional Authority departed the scene last year, Bremer made sure to push through a Transitional Administration Law that aims to deny Iraqi self-determination. By requiring two-thirds majorities of

the constituent assembly to determine such fundamental questions as control of Iraqi oil and the length of U.S. occupation, Bremer's law aimed to assure that a pro-U.S. minority in what is surely to be a highly divided "government" could block any provision the U.S. occupiers oppose.⁷ And U.S. appointed judges and bureaucrats occupy important positions in the governing agencies and in the judiciary. The elections didn't affect them. Nor did they affect Bremer's decision to retain Saddam-era labor laws that outlaw any independent union organizations.

If the Bush administration is planning to leave Iraq any time soon, it would be hard-pressed to explain why it has been building over the past year, according to Joshua Hammer in *Mother Jones*, "up to 14 'enduring' bases across the country—long-term encampments that could house as many as 100,000 troops indefinitely."⁸ More than half of the \$8.5 billion in funds given by the U.S. government to KBR, a division of Halliburton, has gone toward permanent base construction.

Finally, Bush's blather about democracy covers for the outright criminality of the occupation forces. Since November, 2004, when the British journal *Lancet* estimated that more than 100,000 Iraqis may have died as a result of the U.S. invasion and occupation, the occupiers have killed thousands more. The city of Fallujah, once home to at least 300,000 people, is little more than a pile of rubble. Its residents live in tent cities on the town's outskirts, forced to endure retina scans if they want to pass into their city to view the devastation of their homes.

Moreover, the prison torture and other abuses uncovered at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison last year have most certainly continued—and may have gotten worse. A U.S. government investigation released recently concluded that at least 108 prisoners in Afghanistan and Iraq have died in U.S. custody, "most of them violently, according to government data... Roughly a quarter of those deaths have been investigated as possible abuse by U.S. personnel."⁹

Lebanon

The Syrian presence in Lebanon originated in the 1975 Lebanese civil war. The war pitted the forces of the Right allied with Israel, grouped around the fascist Christian Phalange, and the left Lebanese National Movement, involving Arab nationalists, Palestinian and Druze formations, and others.

The civil war had many aspects, one of them being a revolt of the long-excluded Muslim populations rooted in the country's "confessional" political system. The confessional, or setarian system—whereby Lebanese citizens are required to vote only for candidates and parties of their own religious group—was originally set up under French colonial domination in order to prevent a unified national movement. It was enshrined in the country's 1943 constitution. The system was weighted in favor of the minority Maronite Christians. All public posts and parliamentary seats are allotted according to religious affiliation (Sunni and Shiite Muslim, Maronite Christian, Druze, and Greek Orthodox). The last census in Lebanon was held in 1932. If another census were held today, Muslims would emerge as the clear majority of the population.

Originally, Syria backed the Left in the civil war. But in 1976, with the Left on the verge of routing the Right, Syria invaded Lebanon on the side of the Right. The Syrian regime concluded that having a right-wing government allied with Israel in power in Lebanon was preferable to having a Lebanon controlled by leftist militias. Not coincidentally, the U.S. agreed. It acknowledged the "positive role that the Syrian government play[ed] in Lebanon."¹⁰

But the key ally of the U.S., Israel, always intent on meddling in Lebanon, took advantage of the chaos of the civil war to launch its own attempt to reshape the country. In 1978, it invaded a narrow strip of territory on Lebanon's southern border, putting the right-wing Christian militia, the Southern Lebanese Army, in charge. In 1982, Israel, led by then-Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, mounted a massive, unprovoked invasion of the country.

Israel's aim was to crush the Palestinian resistance based in Lebanon and to install a pro-Israel Phalangist strongman in power. After countless atrocities, the murders of more than 15,000 Lebanese civilians, the assassination of Israel's chosen strongman, Bashir Gemayel, and the Phalangist massacres of thousands of Palestinian civilians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, Israel withdrew.

The civil war continued for another eight years, until the 1989 Taif Accords devised a formula for its cessation. Under Taif, Syria would gradually withdraw from Lebanon and the confessional system would be modified to increase participation from forces traditionally locked out. In 1990, the Syrian army defeated a force led by General Michel Aoun, a right-wing Maronite, ending the last resistance to implementing Taif—and strengthening Syria's hand in shaping Lebanese governments since.

In a successful bid to win Syrian support for the 1991 war against Iraq, the U.S. gave its tacit approval to a Syrian takeover of the country's government. Later, George Bush Sr. acceded to Syria's virtual takeover of Lebanon in 1990–91 as the price to be paid for Syrian support of the Persian Gulf War against Iraq. As *Newsweek* put it in 1991:

“[Syrian President Assad (father of the current Syrian president)] has already been paid off handsomely for his stand against Iraq: the gulf Arabs have committed billions in much-needed cash; Washington gave him international respectability and turned a blind eye to his absorption of Lebanon.”¹¹

One circuit through which these billions passed was Lebanon under Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Prime Minister throughout most of the last thirteen years, the billionaire construction magnate undertook to rebuild the damage from the civil war—and no doubt pocketed millions along the way. Despite cultivating an image as “Mr. Lebanon,” he was one of Syria's chief allies in Lebanon until just last year.

His mysterious February assassination touched off the anti-Syrian demonstrations that Bush State Department official Paula Dobriansky dubbed “the Cedar Revolution.” While Syria has certainly worn out its welcome in Lebanon, those at the core of the anti-Syrian demonstrations are supporters of Christian politicians who have been historically the most pro-Western political force in Lebanon. A new element was added to the anti-Syrian coalition when Druze warlord Walid Jumblatt—whose political movement has found itself on opposite sides of Lebanon's political divide several times in its fifty-year history—and some Sunni politicians announced their support for getting the Syrians out.

The anti-Syrian forces found immediate support in the Bush White House. British *Guardian* writer Seumas Milne rightly skewered Bush:

In a pronouncement which defies satire, Bush insisted...that Syria must withdraw from Lebanon before elections due in May “for those elections to be free and fair.” Why the same point does not apply to elections held in occupied Iraq—where the US has 140,000 troops patrolling the streets, compared with 14,000 Syrian soldiers in the Lebanon mountains—or in occupied Palestine, for that matter, is unexplained. And why a UN resolution calling for Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon has to be complied with immediately, while those demanding an Israeli pullout from Palestinian and Syrian territory can be safely ignored for 38 years, is apparently unworthy of comment.¹²

But those demanding Syrian withdrawal face a new political force, rooted in the country's poor Shiite population that has developed in the last two decades. Initially introduced in the early 1980s as a proxy fighting force for the newly installed Islamic Republic in Iran, the Hezbollah militia grew into a powerful resistance movement that managed to drive out the Israelis and the puppets from Lebanon's south in 2000. Hezbollah's role in the resistance to Israel won it prestige and respect across the religious and political divides of Lebanon. Today, it is a political party that operates a vast network of social service agencies and television and radio stations. It is far from the ragtag band of terrorists that the Bush administration accuses it of being. It showed its strength when on March 8 it organized a demonstration of 500,000 that outstripped by a factor of ten the largest of the demonstrations that Bush and the U.S. media had hailed. Of course, the Western media did not consider the Hezbollah demonstration to be part of a wave of democracy in the Middle East.

Although it remains allied with Syria and Iran, Hezbollah's motivation for the mass demonstration of March 8 wasn't only a defense of Syria. It positions itself as favoring the gradual

withdrawal of Syrian troops, as envisioned under Taif, but it opposes U.S., French, and Israeli demands that it disarm. With Hezbollah providing the only successful example of a resistance movement defeating the Israelis, it is not about to surrender itself before enemies that openly announce their intention of dominating the region. That intention—and not some abstract support for “democracy”—is what lies behind Washington’s calls for Syria to get out of Lebanon today.

Because the nature of confessional politics in Lebanon, one cannot simply observe large crowds rallying to demand Syrian withdrawal and conclude that they represent a flowering of democracy. As Milne puts it,

The anti-Syrian protests, dominated by the Christian and Druze minorities, are not in fact calling for a genuine democracy at all, but for elections under the long-established corrupt confessional carve-up, which gives the traditionally privileged Christians half the seats in parliament and means no Muslim can ever be president. As if to emphasize the point, one politician championing the anti-Syrian protests, Pierre Gemayel of the rightwing Christian Phalange party (whose militiamen famously massacred 2,000 Palestinian refugees under Israeli floodlights in Sabra and Shatila in 1982), recently complained that voting wasn’t just a matter of majorities, but of the “quality” of the voters. If there were a real democratic election, Gemayel and his friends could expect to be swept aside by a Hizbullah-led government.¹³

In the weeks since the Hezbollah demonstration, the anti-Syrian coalition mobilized an even bigger demonstration than Hezbollah’s in Beirut. Meanwhile, Hezbollah held large demonstrations in Beirut and in cities in the country’s south. More ominously, a series of bombings in Christian sections of Beirut took place, and Lebanese factions began rearming themselves. All of this suggests that civil war—and not democracy—may be the ultimate progeny of the “Cedar Revolution.”

Palestine

The recent “democratization” in Palestine reflects simply a change in U.S. rhetoric following Yasser Arafat’s death in 2004. For most of Bush’s term in office, and certainly after he made a decisive shift to green-lighting any repression of the Palestinians Israel wanted to dish out in 2002, Bush had refused to engage Arafat at all. In a June 24, 2002 speech that sounded as if Sharon had written it, Bush bluntly said that he would not negotiate with the Palestinians until they removed Arafat. In effect, Bush was dictating to Palestinians who their leadership should be. Palestinian rights supporters Sam Bahour and Todd May explain:

Calls for democratization among the Palestinians serve the wider purposes of the Sharon and Bush administrations. Such calls hint that the problem lies not in the occupation of Palestinian land but in the political character of the Palestinian people. If we are not ready for democracy, as defined by our occupier and its funder, then perhaps, they reason, the occupation can justifiably continue.¹⁴

Arafat’s death in 2004 removed that “obstacle” to U.S.-Palestinian dealings.

In an election held under the guns of the Israeli occupation in January 2005, Washington’s preferred candidate, Mahmoud Abbas (also known as Abu Mazen), won after the only credible opposition candidate, Marwan Barghouti was forced to pull out of the race. Abu Mazen won the election with less than a 50 percent turnout. But, as Palestinian activist and writer Toufic Haddad cautions, “The current fostering and uplifting of Abu Mazen as ‘different from Arafat,’ is only setting the stage for his inevitable demise—when he becomes unwilling and/or unable to fulfill the task that Israel and the U.S. have allotted to him.”¹⁵ That task is to police the Palestinian movement on behalf of Israel—a task that runs contrary to the majority sentiments of the Palestinian people.

In other words, Bush and Sharon have told the Palestinians that the only kind of “democracy” they want is one that will elect a quisling leadership that will be more responsive to Washington

and Jerusalem's agenda than to the needs of Palestinians. This, of course, has nothing at all to do with real democracy.

How Washington Uses "Democracy" As a Club

Since the rise of the U.S. as an imperial power, its rhetoric of democracy has played a key ideological role in justifying U.S. imperial ambitions. The U.S. government talked about helping to free Filipinos and Cubans from "Spanish tyranny" in the Spanish American war—before colonizing both countries for itself. President Woodrow Wilson said the U.S. entered the First World War to "make the world safe for democracy." The Second World War was justified as a fight for democracy against fascism. And the Cold War pitted "democracy" against "communism." Since the end of the Cold War, "democracy promotion" has occupied a central place in the U.S. government's foreign policy rhetoric.

Steven A. Cook of the Council on Foreign Relations provides the mainstream view of Washington's newfound concern for democracy in the Middle East, as embodied in President Bush's Middle East Partnership Initiative:

For most of the last five decades, Washington has done little to promote Arab democratization, relying instead on the autocratic leaders of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other countries to help protect vital U.S. interests in the neighborhood... On the morning of September 11, 2001, U.S. priorities in the Middle East changed. Suddenly, the Bush administration came to see democratization, which it had previously ranked below security and stability in its list of concerns for the Arab world, as the critical means by which to achieve these other goals.¹⁶

No doubt there has been, and continues to be, crass hypocrisy attached to the U.S. government's talk of democracy. Throughout the Cold War, for instance, the U.S. campaigned for democracy and human rights in the Eastern Bloc, while engineering coups, overthrowing elected governments, and supporting military dictatorships in its own empire. But there is one sense in which the U.S. is sincere about democracy. That is in the promotion of a certain type of political regime that is conducive to the needs of "stability" to allow the "maintenance of an international economic order in which U.S. and international business flourishes." One academic study of U.S. democracy promotion showed that the aim of U.S. policy was to promote "polyarchy," a form of elite political and economic organization that aims at "mitigating the social and political tensions produced by elite-based and undemocratic status quos" and also at "suppressing popular and mass aspirations for more thoroughgoing democratization of social life."... The strategy can be achieved through holding elections, which are usually merely a formal mechanism allowing for little or no popular participation in decision making and which prevent the prospects for meaningful social change.¹⁷

To create a more receptive environment in the Middle East, the U.S. government has mobilized its entire apparatus of "democracy promotion." This virtual "democracy industry," starting with U.S. government agencies like the National Endowment for Democracy and U.S. Agency for International Development, filters U.S. government money through private agencies such as institutes attached to the Democratic and Republican parties, the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in order to underwrite political actors supportive of private business, U.S.-style governance, and U.S. foreign policy goals. These organizations helped funnel millions into Afghanistan to support the election of the pro-U.S. government of former CIA asset Hamid Karzai in 2004. U.S. funded opposition forces played a key role in Victor Yushchenko's ouster of the pro-Russian government in Ukraine's "Orange Revolution" in early 2005. The administration and its neoconservative friends believe the same methods can be applied, for example, in Lebanon, in what one observer called "Lebanon's Franchised Cedar Revolution."¹⁸

The aim of these efforts is to foster processes that lead to the desired U.S. outcomes. A high profile think tank task force on Arab "reform," chaired by former Defense Secretary William Cohen, underscored this concern when discussing the pace of democratic reforms in the Middle East: "In

fact, many worried that if reforms happened too quickly and carelessly, radicals would win. 'Democratization that takes place too fast creates Islamism,' a Jordanian cabinet minister cautioned. 'We need to create liberal democracy.'"¹⁹ The Bush I and Clinton administrations showed what they meant by liberal democracy when they gave tacit approval to the Algerian military's cancellation of 1992 democratic elections that the Islamic Salvation Front was likely to win. What resulted was a decade-long civil war that left hundreds of thousands dead. Longtime Middle East expert Dilip Hiro sums up Washington's record since the 1940s:

The United States flaunts the banner of democracy in the Middle East only when that advances its economic, military, or strategic interests. The history of the past six decades shows that whenever there has been conflict between furthering democracy in the region and advancing American national interests, U.S. administrations have invariably opted for the latter course. Furthermore, when free and fair elections in the Middle East have produced results that run contrary to Washington's strategic interests, it has either ignored them or tried to block the recurrence of such events.²⁰

What Washington Really Wants

Rather than representing a response to the 9/11 attacks as the mainstream argues, Washington's democracy offensive in the Middle East can only be understood in light of more traditional U.S. vital interests in the region. Crudely, these can be summed up in two words: oil and Israel. The U.S. demand for oil—both to run its own economy and as a strategic asset for the world's dominant power—explains the primary U.S. interest in the Middle East. In the present day, writes foreign policy critic Michael T. Klare, the U.S. plan to secure Middle East oil revolves around three prongs aimed at the region's biggest oil producers: stabilizing Saudi Arabia, affecting regime change in Iraq (mission accomplished?), and squeezing Iran in lieu of or in preparation for "regime change."²¹ Therefore, any U.S. talk about democracy has to be seen in this light.

After the Iraqi insurgency, Saudi Arabia poses the biggest problem for U.S. interests in the region. A population explosion and a decline in real oil prices over the last three decades have created vast pools of discontent in the kingdom. Young Saudis, who face 40 percent unemployment and diminishing social welfare provision, also resented the U.S. troop presence left over from the 1991 war against Iraq and the corruption and decadence of the royal family. Until recently, the Saudi royal family has tried to deflect these problems by exporting its opponents, like Osama bin Laden, into the lavishly funded Wahhabist *jihadi* network.

Until al-Qaeda began striking U.S. targets, the U.S. cared little about this Saudi stratagem. But financing radical *jihadis* ultimately didn't lessen pressure on the Saudi regime. Very tentative attempts at reform—such as the recent municipal council elections—and King Abdullah's demands for greater transparency in how Saudi princes spend their money are other attempts to appease dissent. Bush has quietly backed these reforms, but he has left it to the Saudi government to determine its pace and extent. Not surprisingly, given the strategic importance of Saudi Arabia to the U.S., we don't hear the same hue and cry for democracy directed towards Saudi Arabia as we do towards Iran or Syria.²² Still, continuing unrest in Saudi Arabia raises the specter of a 1979 Iran-style revolution in the kingdom. For this reason, the U.S. continues to seek ways to support the Saudi regime.

The U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, which allowed the U.S. to redeploy its troops in Saudi Arabia to the permanent military bases currently being constructed in Iraq, provided one way the U.S. government could lessen the pressure on the Saudi government. Ironically, in so doing, the U.S. actually met one of Osama bin Laden's chief demands—for the removal of "infidel" troops from Saudi soil. A new colony in Iraq not only provides the U.S. with vast amounts of oil, but it also provides the U.S. with a launching pad for its plans to remake the Middle East. Bush's rhetoric aside, the connection between democracy and the successful regime change in Iraq is again quite tentative. In fact, the U.S. had hoped the occupation authority would govern the country for years while it groomed a pro-U.S. government to take over for it. But the Iraqi insurgency forced the pace of events.

In the end, the U.S. gave in to Sistani's demands for elections as a way to create some kind of social base for a pro-U.S. Iraqi regime. If the elected Iraqi government manages to ratify a constitution and to conduct another election, the U.S. will pressure it to open the oil industry to foreign investment and to approve the long-term presence of U.S. military bases there. The U.S. embassy will continue to maneuver behind the scenes to create an Iraqi government that will be willing to take these decisions against the wishes of the overwhelming majority of Iraqis. Middle East expert Stephen Zunes put the situation quite well: "While not admitting it publicly, it is becoming increasingly clear that Iraq will either have a democratic government or a pro-American government. It cannot have both."²³

What of the final prong of the U.S. strategy, that of squeezing Iran? In addition to the war of words against Iran over that country's nuclear ambitions, the U.S. administration and its neocon supporters talk up the need for regime change and democratization in Iran. Why the obsession with Iran? Why would the U.S. even think about such an adventure with its Iraq occupation a disaster? Walid Charara explained:

Behind the ideological window-dressing of the new 'democratic messianism,' there are two main reasons for the Bush administration's uncompromising determination. First there is Iran's geostrategic status. It is an independent and middle-ranking regional power that has engaged in military cooperation with Russia and China.... All this makes it the last bastion still to be holding out against a permanent U.S. takeover of the Middle East. [Second,] Iran is the last surveying ally in the region of those states and organizations still opposed to Israel.²⁴

Although Iran's political system is actually more procedurally democratic than the Gulf monarchies or the secular dictatorships of the region, the clerical Council of Guardians has disqualified reformers from running in elections. For that reason, the Bush administration refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Iraqi government. As its point man on Afghanistan and new ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, explained in 2002: "Our policy is not about Khatami or Khameni, reform or hardline; it is about supporting those who want freedom, human rights, democracy, and economic and educational opportunity for themselves and their fellow countrymen and women."²⁵ Meanwhile, the administration would continue to pressure Iran even if that leads to a greater internal crackdown on dissent inside the country. In fact, this is by design as "it is assumed that the hard-liners will become more adamant, and this will allow the United States to foment instability, leading to a regime change."²⁶ Although the administration talks about democracy in Iran, neocon circles and their Israeli Likudnik co-thinkers are promoting as the next rulers of Iran the monarchist coterie around the former Shah's son, Reza Pahlavi!

The campaign against Iran dovetails with the other major U.S. interest in the region, Israel. Historically, Israel has been the linchpin or "watchdog" of U.S. interests in the region. The U.S. has assured that Israel remains the region's dominant military power, second only to the United States. To accomplish that end, the U.S. and Israel have sought to weaken or defeat any potential adversary to Israel or to prevent the emergence of a coalition of countries that could challenge Israel. Historically, Israel perceived those challenges to come from the historic bearers of Arab nationalism, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. And subsequent to the revolution that ousted the pro-Israel Shah, Iran was added to the list. With Egypt neutralized by means of the 1979 Camp David Accords, and Iraq removed by virtue of the U.S. invasion and occupation, Israel can concentrate on Syria and Iran.

This is why Israel and its neoconservative allies in the Bush administration call for democracy and human rights more loudly in these two countries than any others in the region. Bush even has the audacity to demand the end of the Syrian "occupation" of Lebanon—when his own army in Iraq represents the largest occupying power in the Middle East. Therefore, the U.S. campaign for democratization is not so much concerned with democracy as such as it is "[w]eakening both countries and encouraging pro-Israel/United States behavioral change."²⁷ This is what Bush and his allies mean when they promise to "reorganize" the Middle East.

Real Democracy in the Middle East

Bush and the neocons often chide their critics as being opponents of democracy in the Middle East or believing that Arabs and Muslims aren't "ready" for democracy. For those of us on the Left, this charge is baseless. In fact, the Left has been in the forefront of fights for genuine democracy and the rights of the oppressed in the region. But what Bush really means is that there is only one kind of acceptable democracy in the region—the pro-U.S./pro-Israel kind.

Those in and outside the region who are skeptical of U.S. motives in promoting democracy today after backing dictators for years are right to be skeptical. Even the U.S. government's own Defense Science Board challenged Bush's simpleminded mantra of democracy. "Today we reflexively compare Muslim 'masses' to those oppressed under Soviet rule. This is a strategic mistake.... Muslims do not 'hate our freedom' but rather, they hate our policies." The U.S. suffers from "a fundamental problem of credibility." People in the Middle East can see that the "American occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq has not led to democracy there, but only more chaos and suffering."²⁸ Even the United Nations' 2004 *Arab Human Development Report* pointed to the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the U.S. occupation of Iraq as two of the chief obstacles to democracy in the region. The report even included this jab at the U.S.:

The events of September 11 [led] the U.S. Administration...to curtail civil and political rights, especially those of Arabs and Muslims, in the fight against "terrorism" as it defined the term. The fact that some Western countries, which Arab reformers had long held up as models of freedom and democracy, have taken steps widely perceived to be discriminatory and repressive, has weakened the position of those reformers calling for Arab governments undertaking similar actions to change their course.²⁹

Irrespective of the U.S. government's newly minted rhetoric about democracy in the Middle East, indigenous reform movements exist in a number of countries. In 2000 and again in 2003, Syrian intellectuals published statements calling for reform and for a dialog on democracy. These individuals identified themselves as nationalists and opponents of U.S./Israeli meddling in their affairs. More than 100 Saudi intellectuals proposed a similar statement to King Abdullah in 2003, before the invasion of Iraq. And the regimes themselves realize that demographic pressure and economic stagnation require some kind of reform, preferably "reform from above" that the ruling classes can control. Elections in Jordan (1989), Morocco and Bahrain (2002), and Yemen (2003) "were more transparent than, and superior as democratic processes to, the Jan. 30 elections in Iraq."³⁰

But democracy should mean more than simply regular elections. It should mean social rights for the oppressed and exploited and self-determination of nations. It should mean the ability of people of the region to control their own resources. This is precisely the type of the democracy in which the U.S. has no interest. If the Iraqi people were given the right to vote in a referendum on whether the U.S. should get out their country and keep its hands off of their oil, such a referendum would pass overwhelmingly. Therefore, under the current U.S.-controlled system, there will never be such a referendum.

Genuine democracy cannot be imposed on a people from the outside, and certainly not from an imperial power. On the contrary, the struggle for real democracy and self-determination will develop hand-and-hand with the struggle against imperialism—and its collaborators in the oppressed countries. On April 9, 2005, the second anniversary of the U.S.-staged toppling of Saddam's statue in Baghdad's Firdos Square, tens of thousands of Iraqis rallied to demand that the U.S. get out of their country. The demonstrators toppled effigies of Bush and the other leading imperialist advocate of Middle East "democracy," British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

For those of us in the U.S., we have only one choice: to support this development of democracy from below by redoubling our efforts to end the main obstacle to its flowering—the U.S. occupation of Iraq.

Endnotes

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