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Is Democracy Promotion a Cure for Ending Terrorism?

The assumption that democracy is a force that impedes terrorism is a commonly held belief by the Bush administration. Current policies that shape the War on Terror attest to this assumption. A pivotal theme of the current War on Terror dictates that imposing democracy in former autocracies such as Afghanistan and Iraq will rid that state of terrorist activities. Mr. Bush, when defending U.S. military presence in the Arab world, said that the United States is “engaged in a generational challenge to instill democracy”¹. A fruitful democracy in Arab countries is assumed to spread American values in order to ultimately improve U.S. domestic security. When examining these beliefs it is apparent that they do not hold up to much scrutiny.

There is no conclusive evidence that points to the more democratic a state becomes the less likely it is to spawn Anti-American terrorism. Factors that delegitimize U.S. efforts to spread democracy are: immense popularity of Islamist groups in the Middle East who espouse Anti-American platforms and the phenomenon that democracies in general invite more terror attacks than any other type of regime. Defenders of the War on Terror plead that U.S. foreign policy pursue implementing democratic reform, while at the same time build relationships with leaders of states who shun such bulwarks of liberal-democratic institutions, such as a free and independent media and meaningful elections. This presents an ineffective two-faced policy of pursuing realist power relationships with friendly autocrats – while selectively imposing democracy other places in hopes that terrorism will be curbed.

A world defined by a single great hegemon is the world that leaders of the United States seek to understand. Leaders seek out strategic power relationships with some

‘friendly tyrants’ before thought is given to promotion of human rights. In this right, the United States need for strategic military bases in the Middle East supercedes its willingness to spread democracy. This is exactly why the Bush administration cozies up to autocratic leaders. The realist camp of the Bush Administration actively pursues relations with leaders who hardly support a meaningful democracy with in their own country but are friendly to U.S. military objectives. Thomas Carothers in his essay, *Promoting Democracy and Fighting Terror*, examines the dualism that pervades U.S. policy; trying to achieve military objectives while paying lip service to democratic reforms. Carothers asserts that the most evident case of its dualist policy can be seen through U.S. relations with Pakistan. Pakistan’s leader General Pervez Musharraf was given the cold shoulder in 1999 by officials in Washington, but because of Musharraf’s support of the War on Terror the Bush Administration has “showered Musharraf with praise and attention, waived various economic sanctions, assembled a handsome aid package that exceeded \$600 million in 2002, a restarted a U.S.-Pakistani military cooperation.”ⁱⁱ. The realist stance that military power is more important than democracy supports the liberal paradigm; states are rational and self-interested so we should prop up states that help US securityⁱⁱⁱ. If military power is a corner stone of U.S. foreign policy, why then do leaders pay lip service to democracy promotion?

Democracy is an essential element that leaders of the U.S. need to use in order to gain support among people that believe in democratic peace. In its most basic form democracy is a regime type which is widely and popularly elected. This simple formulation of democracy is the type associated the ancient Greeks. Modern, Western societies hold a more complex definition of democracy; one that conforms to a

conception of a *liberal* democracy. Liberalism is an illusive concept that is difficult to define. Scholars use the word liberal when a state engages in promotion of characteristics such as, individualism, freedom, private property, and equality of opportunity.

Democracy researcher John Owen offers a definition of liberal states in his article, *How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace*, saying, Liberal democracies are those states with a visible liberal presence, and that feature free speech and regular competitive elections of the officials empowered to declare war.^{iv} Most all liberal states share these characteristics, although not one has perfected all of them. In turn, a liberal democracy is what United States foreign policy makers wish to promote.

The cult of democracy promotion insists that the end result of wide democratization is lasting peace. Scholars such as Michael Doyle in his article, *Liberalism and World Politics*, contend that, “When it is citizens who bear the burden of war elects their governments, wars become impossible”^v. Democratic peace is a highly influential school of thought encompassing the idea that a peace exists between democratic countries. This is not to be confused in saying that democracies are bastions of peace, it is to say that democracies do not wage war with other democracies.

Washington seeks close ties with autocracies through out the Middle East while at the same time believing that it is a lack of democracy that breeds terrorism. Supporting liberal democracy promotion and cooperating with regimes that are not democratic are reasons why Mr. Bush’s foreign policy displays a “split personality”. Administration officials explicitly link terrorism with a lack of meaningful democracy.

The need to instill democratic institutions abroad is a large talking point for U.S. foreign policy makers. In his article, *Can Democracy Stop Terrorism*, F. Gregory Gause

seeks to explore the claim by the Bush administration that democracy stunts the growth of Anti-American terrorism. Gause's article reflects pessimism about democracy. He questions the links between democracy and U.S. security; highlighting that supporters of the War on Terror contend, "That a push for democracy will not only spread American values but also improve U.S. security"^{vi}. Leaders assume that democratic reforms will end Anti-American sentiment in many Arab states. These claims seem ill conceived when examining the amount of terrorist strikes with in a democracy with the amount of strikes within an autocracy. India, the world's most populous democracy, from 1986-2001 had over 400 terrorist attacks where as China; the world's most populous autocracy suffered fewer than 20 attacks^{vii}. Figures such as these support the idea that a lack of terrorism with in a state is no way connected with the robustness of democratic institutions. In fact Robert Pape, in his documentation of suicide terrorist attacks, surmises that democracies are the main targets of terrorist attacks. He highlights that their publics have a low threshold of cost tolerance and high ability to affect state policy^{viii}. People are subject to cohesion by terrorist attacks in democracies because the populous has meaningful authority to affect state policy, while in autocracies a tyrant has no incentive to give into terrorist causes - the will of the people does not matter.

Strong support for democracy has been shown in many Arab states; voter turnout of the population is far higher than it is in the United States. Turn out in recent Kuwaiti elections yielded more than 70 percent^{ix}. The populous of many of these states are not voting for parties that are intent on instituting liberal polices that are friendly with the west; polities have high support for Islamist parties. The most recent elections in Palestine showed a surprise defeat of the nationalist PLO by the Islamist Hamas party^x.

Hamas is a party classified by the United States as a terrorist organization – an enemy of liberal ideology. Elections such as these indicate the unpopularity of U.S. policy, particularly the U.S. presence in Iraq^{xi}. It is evident that the realist practices of military dominance in the Middle East does not gain support for U.S. values, as President Bush hoped it would when he said, “[promotion of democracy in the broader Middle East] is to change the conditions that give rise to extremism and terror”^{xii}. Democratic reforms then would have little effect on the amount of terrorism that is generated on Arab states that instill them. It could as Gause puts it, “help bring to power governments much less cooperative on a whole range of issues”^{xiii}. A new Islamist-democratic state would override the realist goals of the Bush administration among those goals, striving for a positive relationship with Middle East governments. The friendly treatment of tyrants in Arab countries is reason for Arabs not to vote for U.S. friendly political parties. Under the assumption that democratically elected governments would better represent the opinions of the population, it would be evident that democratization would produce government opposed to U.S. policy. Citing a 2002 Gallup poll, Gause highlights that, “of those surveyed in Jordan (62 percent) and Saudi Arabia (64 percent) rated the U.S. unfavorably”^{xiv}. Instead it seems that U.S. policy is blanketing the need for security with democratic reforms.

United States foreign policy officials confuse the idea that democracy inherently makes a state friendly to U.S. policies. Carothers traces this phenomenon to the days of the Regan administration. In promoting democracy in former Soviet Eastern European states the Regan administration brought closer ties between the U.S. and the former Soviet states. Comparing Eastern Europe and the Middle East is not helpful because the

areas are two very different areas with two very different histories. Eastern Europe historically has had close ties to Western Europe; in turn the transition to democracy was relatively painless. Eastern European countries easily integrated their economies with the West; this made it easier to create liberal democracies that the West was calling for. Democracy cannot be used as a tool to gain U.S. support – it isn't a one-size-fits-all solution. If democracy promotion is revealed to be an instrumental strategy for producing political outcomes favorable to U.S. interests, the value and legitimacy of the concept will be lost^{xv}.

Achieving a balance of security objectives as well as promoting democracy to end terrorism in the Middle East is a daunting task. This current policy is ineffective and wasteful. Instead the Administration should look to promote liberal reforms and institutions in an evolutionary fashion as opposed to revolutionary. It took the United States over 200 years to achieve anything close to a full fledged liberal democracy^{xvi}; a similar process of evolutionary change should be applied to autocracies in the Middle East. Gause is in favor of this because a focus on liberal reforms will “set down roots and mobilize voters”^{xvii}. The U.S. should support the rise of internal parties that emulate politics and policies of the United States. In doing this the governments that rise will be the work of domestic actors not imposed externally. Daniel Brumberg in his essay, *Liberalization versus Democracy*, mirrors the ideas of Gause by voicing support for Liberalized autocracies in the Middle East. In opening up elections Brumberg contends that the pluralist atmosphere will be invited by the autocrat because it will be essential to survival^{xviii}. In a fully autocratic society no pluralist entity could be viable because any opening to a place of power would be a serious threat to the longevity of an autocrats

reign. The brevity of the democratic task at hand is difficult, but by promotion of internal liberal institutions the U.S. could expect to see a return of friendly governments that do not give rise to terrorism.

Notes

- ⁱ Gause, Gregory F. "Can Democracy Stop Terrorism." *Among Nations*. Boston, MA: Pearson Custom, 2007. 86-100. (88).
- ⁱⁱ Carothers, Thomas. "Promoting Democracy and Fighting Terror." *Among Nations*. Boston, MA: Pearson Custom, 2007. 101-114. (102).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Biswas, Bidisha, Lecture, 1/30/2007.
- ^{iv} Owen, John. "How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace." *Among Nations*. Boston, MA: Person Custom, 2007. 42-85. (44)
- ^v Doyle, Micheal W. "Liberalism and World Politics." *Among Nations* 1 (2007): 14-41 (15)
- ^{vi} Gause, Can Democracy Stop Terrorism, (85).
- ^{vii} Biswas, Bidisha, Lecture, 1/30/2007.
- ^{viii} Pape, Robert A. "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism." *American Political Science Review* 97 (2003): 343-361. (349).
- ^{ix} Gause, Can Democracy Stop Terrorism, (85).
- ^x [Palestinian Territories: Inside Hamas](http://www.pbs.org). Dir. Marcela Gaviria. Perf. Kate Seelye. 2006. www.pbs.org. 01 Feb. 2007
<http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/palestine503/video_index.html>.
- ^{xi} Biswas, Bidisha, Lecture, 1/30/2007.
- ^{xii} Gause, Can Democracy Stop Terrorism, (88).
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.*, 98.
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.*, 95.
- ^{xv} Carothers, Promoting Democracy and Fighting Terror, (111).
- ^{xvi} Biswas, Bidisha, Lecture, 1/09/2007.
- ^{xvii} Gause, Can Democracy Stop Terrorism, (99).
- ^{xviii} Brumberg, Daniel. "Liberalization Versus Democracy." *Uncharted Journey: Promoting Democracy in the Middle East*. Carnegie Endowment, 2005. 15-37. (17).