

The Middle Eastern Democratization in the Context of Anti-Americanism

Jian Wang & Shuming Wang*

***Abstract:** The US's Middle Eastern democratization strategy is based on realist considerations of anti-terrorism and national security, while in contrast the Islamic-Arab world's anti-Americanism originates from negative effects of modernization and globalization along with perceptions of an inherent unfairness in the US's Middle East policy. Consequently, the advancement of the Middle Eastern democratization processes within this context are bound to face obstacles and distortion. Anti-Americanism not only leads to the absence of a stable environment for democratization in the Middle East, but also constrains the US's possible avenues to pursue its Middle Eastern democratization strategy when some Arab authoritarian governments use it as a check and balance to resist the US's democratization pressure.*

***Key Words:** Anti-Americanism; Middle East; Democratization*

September 11, 2001 was a key turning point in the US's Middle Eastern democratization strategy. With the renewed focus on the very realist considerations of anti-terrorism and national security, the US spared no effort to promote democratic transformation in the Middle East, to rebuild the failed states, and curb radical Islamic movements. But the unbalanced nature of globalization and the perception of an inherent unfairness in the US's Middle East policy instead bred deep anti-Americanism across the region, and will continue to resist and block the US's Middle Eastern democratization strategy.

I. Motives of the US's Democratic Transformation toward the Middle East

Throughout the 20th Century, though the product deeper historical roots, the global expansion of democracy has remained a focal point of the US diplomatic agenda. Though claiming itself as the "world beacon" or "a shining city on the

* Jian Wang, Associate Professor of the Institute for Eurasian Studies and Director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences. Shuming Wang, Assistant Professor at the Institute for Eurasian Studies at Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences.

hill," as President Ronald Reagan did, the US adopted a very coldly pragmatic path towards democratization in the Middle East before September 11, 2001. The focus was to win the support of Middle Eastern nations in the Cold War, secure its strategic interests in resources from the region, and prevent anti-American radical Islamic forces from assuming power. This manifested itself through a tendency for the US to cultivate close ties with local monarchies and authoritarian regimes, while ignoring democratic appeals from the Middle East. For example, on January 13, 1992, following the military coup that upset Algeria's burgeoning democratic system, the United States issued a formal but low-key statement condemning the military takeover. Twenty-four hours later, the Department of State spokesman retracted the statement, calling for a peaceful resolution but offering no condemnation of the coup. Since then, the US, like many of its Western counterparts, has appeared resigned to accepting "a military dictatorship in Algeria."¹ The theoretical explanation underpinning this pragmatic path is the so-called "exception of the Middle East," i.e., the difficulties of successful democracy in the turbulent Middle East, and for some, the incompatibility between the Allah-worshipping Islam and secular democracy. As Bernard Lewis has pointed out, "... predominant Muslim regions show very few functioning democracies,"² while Laurie Mylroie maintained, "in Islam political and religious authority are one, and sovereignty rests with God or his vice regent instead of sovereignty rests with the people." Thus, there is a strain in American political thought that believes that liberal democracy does not fit with the Islamic tradition at all.³

September 11, 2001, however, changed all this and became a key turning point in the US's Middle East democracy policy. As American policymakers and thinkers gradually began to trace the connection between anti-Americanism and terrorism to the democratic deficit and consequent crises within these nations, it began to reconsider its relationship with the Arabic-Islamic world. There was a realization that this disparity would pose a substantial challenge to American national security if it was not turned abruptly around. As was pointed out in *US National Security Strategy*, "failed" or "failing states" are hotbeds of terrorism and other forms of extremism, and black holes to the international community. In addition, many Muslims currently live in a state of despair and have not felt the benefits of globalization, while they remain under the thumb of regional autocrats. Only through the expansion of democracy and a move away from autocracy will peace, prosperity and hope flourish in the region, uprooting the current strains of anti-Americanism and help decrease terrorism from the

¹ <http://countrystudies.us/algeria/152.htm>

² Bernard Lewis, "Islam and Liberal Democracy: A History Overview," *Journal of Democracy*. Vol.7, April 1996, p.54.

³ Laurie Mylroie, "Promoting Democracy as a Principle of U.S Middle East Policy," in Yehudah Mirsky & Matt Ahrens ed., *Democracy in the Middle East: Defining the Challenge*, A Washington Institute Monograph, 1993.

region.

This new model for democratic expansion was first publicly enunciated in December 2002, when Secretary of State Colin L. Powell presented *The US-Middle East Partnership Initiative: Building Hope for the Years Ahead* in a speech at the Heritage Foundation, where he set up a preliminary framework for reshaping the social and regional order in the Middle East. In February 2003, President George W. Bush elaborated the policy of the democratic expansion and transformation in the Middle East at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research where he demanded a narrowing of the "Freedom Gap" in the region. In November 2003, Bush further defined the "Democratic Transformation Strategy" as a "Forward Strategy of Freedom in the Middle East," suggesting that Middle Eastern "autarchies" had been allied with the former Soviet camp and international terrorism. The argument was made that Western tolerance and appeasement towards the freedom deficiency in the Middle East meant the least reassurance of security, and that in the long run stability does not come at the cost of freedom. In January 2004, the Greater Middle East concept appeared in Bush's *State of the Union* for the first time. He demanded that the US's new priority in the Middle East should be given to the promotion of free elections, free markets, free media and free trade unions in the region. At the G8 summit of June of the same year, the "Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative" was put forth formally, later renamed as "Pan-Middle East and North Africa Initiative," aiming at strengthening political, economic, social and cultural co-operation with governments, enterprises and civil societies of the Middle East to achieve freedom, democracy and prosperity.

For American decision-makers, represented at the time by the neo-conservative group focused around institutions like the American Enterprise Institute, democracy became not only necessary, but also a feasible concept in a region where it used to be considered an "exceptional" idea to be deployed with great prudence. Richard Haass claimed, "...when given the opportunity, Muslims are embracing democratic norms and choosing democracy. Dynamic reform experiments underway in many parts of the Muslim world demonstrated that democracy and Islam are compatible."⁴ The neo-conservatives regarded security, reform and peace as three complementary pillars for the realization of the US Middle East strategy. Winning the battle of ideas against terrorism and bringing about universal de-legitimization of terror could only be achieved through the expansion of American values and promotion of democracy reform in order to change the status quo of the Middle East countries radically.⁵ Meanwhile, democratic reform is also regarded as a

⁴ Richard N. Haass, "Towards Great Democracy in the Muslim World," Remarks to the Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, DC, December 4, 2002.

⁵ Report of President Study Group, "Security, Reform and Peace: The Three Pillars of American Policy in the Middle East," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2005, p.xi.

prerequisite for the settlement of the Palestine-Israel conflict, in that a just, responsible and authoritative government in Palestine could lead a new set of political and economic institutions based on democracy, market economics and action against terrorism could be established.⁶

The US's democratic transformation towards the Middle East, which shares realism's insights about the centrality of power, is a realist choice by the Bush administration disguising its "New Imperialism" sword with which it seeks to import democracy via its superpower status into the a region of the world of vital strategic importance to its hegemony. It is believed that the Middle East is the Achilles' heel to the legitimacy of US hegemony and its absolute national security, and the anti-American Islamic radicals are the archenemy. In our opinion, the so-called "Democratic Transformation Strategy" towards the Middle East is a key step towards building a new American imperialism that relies on US hegemony with an aim of transforming and diminishing anti-Americanism and establishing its legitimate authority in the region.

II. Anti- Americanism: Yoke on the Empire

Barry Rubin has maintained, "Anti-Americanism even proves useful for the public itself, holding the United States responsible for everything wrong in their lives helps explain how the world works and why life never seems to improve for them."⁷ Although such remarks sound like excuses for the US Middle East policy, there is certainly a suggestion of the very real and serious crises facing the Arabic-Islamic world.

Anti-Americanism in the Arab and Islamic are the result of the pervasive crisis in the Arabic-Islamic world under the impact of modernization and globalization. Since the early 1900s, the Arabic-Islamic world has made constant efforts towards revival and modernization, using vehicles such as nationalism, socialism or capitalism in a variety of permutations at various stages. As a whole, however, it has lagged behind the rest of global modernization and has not benefited from globalization as have some other regions of the world. National independence in the wake of the Second World War and the end of colonialism brought a new phase of modernization to the region. Unfortunately, a series of social and economic problems as a result of blindly following the Western or socialist models of development without considering specific regional conditions - including stagnant economic development, underdeveloped industry and agriculture - led to poverty among many in these

⁶ "President Bush Calls for New Palestinian Leadership," <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06/print/2020624-3.html>.

⁷ Barry Rubin, "The Real Roots of Arab Anti-Americanism," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December, 2002, p.80-81.

states and fostered a deeply disordered social transformation. The end result was a “structural shock” to most states in the region: population explosions, high unemployment rates, an expanding gap between the rich and the poor, rampant corruption, moral decline, familial and social decomposition and a critical identification crisis. As scholars James A. Bill and Rebecca Bill Chavez reflected, “in the Middle East traditional social and political systems are everywhere under siege. These systems crack and crumble, tear and unravel, shatter and splinter.”⁸ That such a frustrated society will look back to historical Islamic traditions for comfort and answers while at the same time blaming external actors as a vent is unsurprising, and within this we can see the beginnings of the toxic blend of Islamic revivalism and anti-Western and anti-American sentiment that provide the context for current problems.

Anti-Americanism in the Arabic-Islamic world can only be fully understood against the background of the rhetoric of ongoing conflict between the Muslim world and the West. While previously in the Middle Ages the Arabic-Islamic Caliphate had led the world in prosperity and civilization, all was reversed with the Renaissance in Western Europe and the growing modernization and industrialization of the West. The order that emerged in the wake of this shift reduced the Arab-Islamic world to merely being the victim of the Western European imperialism and colonialism. This dominating anti-Western complex prevailed among Muslims and continued as they watched their lands being carved up by Western powers which were seen to be looting the region hand-in-hand with a pernicious cultural infiltration. With European hegemony broadly being seen as being displaced by the US, it inevitably inherited the anti-Western legacy, something that was exacerbated when Islamic economies failed to benefit as much as Western ones thanks to what was seen as the American-led globalization. In addition, the Arabic-Islamic culture and identity were also impacted by growing globalization that seemed to also actively promote Western culture. Globalization as many Muslims see it, therefore, is just a tool for the US to expand its hegemony, realize economic dominance to others’ detriment and advocate Western lifestyle and consumerism – a selfish and negative stance, which, in turn, has aggravated anti-Americanism in the region.

Compared with the European powers, the US got much further involved in the Middle East affairs, especially when it gained the leading position in the post-Cold War era. From the realist political perspective, anti-Americanism is the inevitable result of what is seen as a deeply unfair Middle Eastern policy pursued by the US.

The first of such a list of unfair US policies must unfortunately be the US

⁸ James A Bill & Rebecca Bill Chavez, “The Politics of Incoherence: The United States and the Middle East,” *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 56, No.4, Autumn 2002, p.562.

decision to take the Israeli side in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which to many is regarded as the epitome of the Islamic-Western conflict by the Muslims. Israel, established with the help of Western countries, including the US and the UK, is often considered “a nail driven into the heart” of the Middle East as one form of “neo-imperialism.” Michael Scott Doran pointed out, “...precisely because it invokes a version of the history of relations between the Middle East as a whole and the West, Palestine is one of the few communal symbols that crosses religious, ethnic, and national lines.”⁹ Muslims suffer with the Palestinians and fall into further despair and indignation as the Palestinians continue to be unable to resolve their state misery and humiliation. This sense of humiliation is exacerbated by the frequent failures of the Arab nations choosing to fight wars with Israel. Thanks to its support of Israel, the US is regarded as “big Satan” from the view of the Muslim world (and Israel is seen as “little Satan” in the eyes of most Muslims).

Second, there is a broad sense that the US continues to impose a sort of double standards on democratization and prevention of the proliferation of WMDs in the Middle East. While the US has advocated freedom, democracy and human rights, it is seen as having ignored the suffrage of Muslims in the region by backing authoritarian governments and even launched coups to prevent the Islamic movements from coming into power through public elections. One highly disputed example is, for example, in the free election of Hamas leaders in Palestine, but thwarted by Israel, the US, the U.K. and the EU. In terms of human rights, the US has allowed Israel a free hand in its occupation of Palestine territory since 1967 and even earlier since 1948, seemingly in the fact of the rights of Palestinian refugees, and the ten-year-long sanctions against Iraq were seen as a cruel punishment inflicted upon the innocent Iraqi people. Finally, the US has turned a blind eye to the development of nuclear weapons in Israel, while it has treated and punished the development and application of nuclear technology in Middle Eastern Islamic countries as a fearful threat.

Third, in its efforts to build a “new empire,” the US has often taken what is seen as a deeply arrogant stance that naturally attracts further animosity. Since September 11, 2001, the expansion of hegemony in the name of “anti-terrorism” of the current Bush administration has enraged waves of anti-Americanism in the Middle East and other parts of the world as well. The usage of terminology like “axis of evil,” and “rogue state” was seen by many as exposing the arrogance and hegemonic intent of the Bush administration. The US’s image of supporting democracy and safeguarding human rights were severely undermined not only by its double-standards with regards Israel, but also the deaths of Afghan and Iraqi civilians, and the “torture-gate” at Abu Ghraib prison. Finally, the ongoing failure to find any of WMDs or support of Al Qaeda terrorism by Saddam Hussein

⁹ Michael Scott Doran, “Palestine, Iraq, and American Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2003, p.21.

seemed to have confirmed Muslims' doubts about the authenticity of American Middle East policy. Consequently, the "...instance of anti-Americanism has emerged across all social groups in the Islamic world— including educated, Westernized Arab liberals."¹⁰

III. Influence of Anti-Americanism on Middle East Democratization

Recently, there has been a surge of political participation and social renovation in the Arabic-Islamic world to alleviate the burden created by their region's inability to fully benefit from modernization and globalization to promote regional development and economic prosperity. A specific instance is the 2002 *The Arab Human Development Report*, written by more than 30 Arab scholars. Before World War II, most Arab intellectuals were deeply admiring and eager to import the Western European democratic tradition, but were forced to question its suitability in the Arab world after the nominally free election of 1943 in Syria. Subsequently, various ideologies and structures emerged in the discussion among the intelligentsia, including socialism, Arabian nationalism, enlightened despotism, and the Islamic Movement - which eventually became the mainstream ideology and movement in the 1970s. Their ideology took returning to Islamic fundamentalism as the concise and effective recipe to deal with the lasting crisis in the Arab world, and found that its mainstream constituency was the moderate population. They were determined to realize their goal by political means instead of violence, and most were enthusiastic advocates of democracy with no hope of gaining power. Some members resorted to extremism when they found their efforts towards a legitimate democratic approach stymied by local governments and the US's Middle East policy. After September 11, 2001, the US's "Democratization Transformation Strategy" adapted to the democratic desire in the Islamic world to some degree, and Arab countries have also reached a consensus that some level of domestic reform is necessary. Palestine, Iraq, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have made historic progress in their democratization, but anti-Americanism is becoming so prevalent as to hinder and distort Arab-Islamic democratization, particularly when the concept of democracy has been so intertwined with the United States. This is manifested mainly in the following aspects:

First, the constant turbulence and chaos in the region resulted from American policies which have failed to create a stable environment that is needed for democratization. The US had planned to turn Iraq, a nation at the heart of the region both literally, but also figuratively, into a "democratic model" in the Islamic

¹⁰ Marc Lynch, "Taking Arabs Seriously", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.82, No.5, September/October 2003, p.81.

world that could act as a starting point for deeper democratization across the region. However, the US encountered strong resistance and an enduring insurgency drawing from disenfranchised Sunnis and former members of the Baath Party, to foreign (and domestic) Al Qaeda-style Islamic radicals, and even angry Shiites who formed the Mahdi Army led by the Islamic cleric leader Muqtada al-Sadr. As the US presence dragged on, the “liberators” were increasingly seen as “invaders” and Islamic radicals intensified their attacks, neither willing to accept imported democracy as it was considered the tool for long-term occupation of Iraq by the US. Attacks on American troops and Iraqi governmental institutions and personnel were intensified, while attacks were staged to disrupt social order and even provoke civil war. The turbulence and instability in the process of Iraqi democratization weakened the reform momentum of the democrats in the Middle East.

Second, the absence of desirable forums for collaboration with democrats in the region tremendously restricted and even undermined the US’s determination to further expand democracy in the region, a factor which also acted as a main reason for the promotion of the policy of Middle Eastern “exception” in the past. The shift in its democratic strategy towards the Middle East is a realistic consideration on the US side, attempting to eradicate terrorism and anti-Americanism within “failed states” by means of democratic transformation to guarantee national security. Yet undeniably, the successful practice of pro-Western liberal democrats in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe led to American misjudgments of the global tendency towards democracy, operating as it did on the assumption that history has also ended in the Middle East. In reality, however, liberal democrats in the Arabic-Islamic world are mainly unorganized intellectuals with little influence and the mass of the populace where the basis of the anti-American context is based, who are often marginalized in the public eye as being merely American puppets. The real challenge comes from well-organized, mass-based Islamists, who confront the authoritarian governments. Although some might have accepted Western democracy as an expedient measure, they would be radical again after gaining power since American democracy based on secularism and liberalism is totally unacceptable to Islamists. Furthermore, with their deep-roots within social structures (and often their ability to provide social services the state is unable to), Islamic movements are often able to win easily in public elections thanks both to their popularity, but also to their good organizational and mobilizing capability. Hamas in Gaza distinguishes itself as proof of how such events can occur. The US’s “Democratic Transformation Strategy” towards the Middle East could consequently face the high risk of an Islamist group “kidnapping” democracy, in other words, Islamists (including the radicals) win public elections democratically, and then once in office slowly impose theocratic legislation.

Recognizing this potential danger, some American scholars recently called for the careful reconsideration of the US's "Democratic Transformation Strategy" towards the Middle East. Ariel Cohen, an expert with the conservative Heritage Foundation, requested a systematic examination of the strategy from four aspects, namely, its substantive content, US interests, election essence and prevention of legalization of terrorist organizations. He maintained that "the participants in the political process should be pluralistic, democratic and non-violent. They should recognize minority rights, women's rights, where relevant, the right of Israel to exist with secure borders. US's support for democracy would serve its long-term national interests in the Middle East, and when election outcomes jeopardize vital American interests, the support of democracy needs to be weighed against other US concerns. Election alone doesn't equal democracy. Civil society, rule of law, protection of minority rights, freedom of speech and worship, and other individual rights are all part of democracy. The US and its allies should not deal with a Hamas-dominated Palestinian Authority or any other popularly elected Jihadist entities and should not provide them with diplomatic recognition, direct or indirect economic assistance, or any other form of international legitimacy. The US must do so realistically, taking into account its own national interests, as well as the complexity of foreign political cultures and traditions."¹¹ [This quote should be set apart and indented because of its length.]

Third, anti-Americanism and the chaos it engenders helps authoritarian governments alleviate the pressure of the democratization asked for by the US, so that these governments can dominate and control the process of local political reform. Faced with American and domestic demands of transformation, some governments in the Middle East had to respond, but the level of anti-Americanism meant they did not have to do this to the point of choosing to commit political suicide. The promotion of democratization under US pressure in a strongly anti-American society will be doomed to undermine the government's legitimacy. The more the US forces the import of democratization, the more likely it is boycotted by the Arab-Islamic countries. In March 2003, the US's "Democratic Transformation Strategy" was boycotted at the foreign ministers' meeting of the League of Arab States, who counteracted it by putting forth their own plan of reform.

Arab leaders also associated the process of reform with some pan-Arab problems to resist democratization pressure, and the March 2005 speech made by Egyptian president Mohammed Hosni Mubarak at Alexandria City is very typical. On the one hand, he believed in the necessity of reform in the Arab world, mainly in educational modernization, free economy and improvement of human rights conditions, especially women's rights; on the other hand, he maintained that

¹¹ Ariel Cohen, "State of the Union 2006: Democracy in the Middle East," <http://www.heritage.org/Research/MiddleEast/wm983.cfm>.

reform should neither be carried out in the form that undermined Arab stability, nor be manipulated by radical forces. Moreover the international cooperation mechanism for reform has already existed, such as the Barcelona process. Obviously, what is acceptable for him is an independent, moderate and free reform based on stability. The so-called Middle East crisis is primarily the endless conflict between Palestine and Israel. In fact, with the rise of the Islamic Movement in the political arena, the chaos in Iraq and Shiites' coming into power, and especially Hamas' success in the Palestinian election, the US has become hesitant in its expansion of democratization in the region, while some authoritarians were taking the chance to control the local democratization. The Egyptian local election was delayed two years, the election plan of the Qatar parliament was postponed for the third time, the Yemeni government tried to check the press before the presidential election, the Saudi King refused the request for electing the Consultative Meeting, and Syria pressed the oppositions severely shortly after its promise to reform.

Fourth, anti-Americanism also restricts the path choice of US's "Democratic Transformation Strategy" towards the Middle East. There are still pro-Western and pro-American oppositions in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, where the US also tried to compress the strategic fronts of Russia and China geopolitically; thus the US democrats often stirred up street riots and succeeded in "color revolutions" there; whereas in most Arab-Islamic countries, where no such strong pro-Americanism exists and the authoritarian governments are indispensable in the US anti-terrorism efforts, the US had to take the top-down gradual approach to promote its democratization through consulting and coordinating with the authoritarians, fearing that Islamic radicals might come to rule. President Bush also had to admit, "working democracies always need time to develop--as did our own. We've taken a 200-year journey toward inclusion and justice--and this makes us patient and understanding as other nations are at different stages of this journey."¹²

To sum up, anti-Americanism has had multiple influences on the US's "Democratic Transformation Strategy" towards the Middle East. To free itself from the dilemma, the US must be seen to be promoting mutual respect between the Islamic and Western civilizations through dialogue instead of unfair policies, force and hegemony so as to help foster the economic and social progress of the region, which has been marginalized in the process of modernization and globalization.

¹² President Bush Discusses Freedom in Iraq and Middle East, *Remarks by the President at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, United States, Chamber of Commerce, Washington, DC.* <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-2.html>.