

## **A View from the Arab World : January 28-February 3, 2004**

By Rami G. Khouri, in Beirut, Lebanon

### **The ranch, the garage, and democratizing the Middle East**

The United States government has shifted into high gear in its drive to bring democracy and freedom to the Middle East, to judge by the recent speeches of President George W. Bush and Vice-President Dick Cheney. They raise important and timely issues that should be considered with great thought and patience. The manner and context in which they raise the issues, however, are messy and imprecise. This gap between American ideals and exhortations, on the one hand, and American real world policies, on the other, has always generated the dark holes and the killing fields where friendship, respect, and cooperation among Washington and most Arabs and other Middle Easterners often floundered and died.

The United States in recent decades has engaged with the Middle East through the lenses of several big issues, including the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Cold War, home-grown Arab governance and security policies, economic development policies, human rights issues, the wars, embargo, and occupation in Iraq, public diplomacy to generate better understanding and good will, and the current "war against terrorism", to mention only the most important ones. Amazingly, on every one of these issues the United States has usually alienated huge majorities of people in the Arab and other Middle Eastern countries.

The reasons for this on the American side include cultural and political ignorance, absence of historical sensibilities, a misunderstanding of the role of religion and other traditional and social values, the distortions of pro-Israeli, pro-oil and other narrowly-focused lobby groups in Washington,

and the peripheral impact of the Middle East in domestic US politics (the Arabs share the blame for their deficiencies as well, including moribund diplomacy and top-heavy governance systems whose ruling elites often covet Washington's protection and money more than the approval of their own people).

After Sept. 11, the United States has sought a new handle with which to engage Middle Eastern societies, and new remedies to fix the problems that led to terror attacks against US targets in the past decade. We have, consequently, another veritable shopping cart of proposals from Washington to repair our damaged societies ? regime changes, Congressional "accountability" acts, threats of economic and other embargos, the war against terror, free trade agreements, education reform programs, strengthening entrepreneurial and business capabilities, democracy and human rights programs, public diplomacy via new radio and television services, on-and-off commitments to help resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, and more

that is yet to come, for sure.

Promoting democracy and freedom has taken center stage in this American season, as articulated by the administration's top guns. In this new season

of Middle Eastern democratization, President Bush is the Marlboro Man and Vice-President Cheney is Mr. Fix-it. Their combined physical swagger, moral

certitude, and nuts-and-bolts, head-under-the-hood practicality are impressive by any standard. But are they serious? Will their resolve last beyond this winter's snows? Do they have a realistic approach to achieving their noble goals? And have they or their deputies taken the time to actually consult with people in the Middle East to find out how a combined American-Arab-Muslim-Middle Eastern-North African democratization initiative might be designed and implemented?

Having alienated majorities of Middle Easterners on the other big sticker

issues of the last two generations, the United States should carefully study

a more effective and humble way to succeed in promoting democracy and freedom. Our criticisms of Marlboro Man and Mr. Fix-it are many and real; but equally strong throughout this region is the yearning to work closely with the United States to achieve goals that we define together.

If Washington is on hormonal overdrive to promote Arab democracy mainly because it thinks this will protect it from future terror attacks, while the

half a dozen other real reasons for anti-American sentiments remain live throughout this region, this process will fail fast. That would be a terrible shame that should be avoided at all costs. The majority of Arabs and other Middle Easterners want democracy and the dignity of governance that it provides ? and they are eager to work with the United States to move

in this direction. But there are two massive constraints that must be tackled simultaneously if we hope to succeed.

First, the US should acknowledge that it cannot expect to be credible with

Middle Easterners on democracy if most of its other policies in the region are seen here as unacceptable, unfair, or biased against the majority of ordinary citizens. Democratization cannot be pushed in isolation of addressing other realities and fixing other problems that are far more important to the ordinary person in the Middle East, especially the Arab-Israeli issue, the religious-secular balance, jobs and socio-economic development, and a sense that ordinary citizens can live in dignity and expect to be treated with justice.

Second, the US should understand that the same Middle Eastern majority that wants to work with the US to democratize our societies simultaneously does not want democracy delivered in the manner that it is now being proffered by Washington. Style matters as much as substance. If the US

continues to offer us democracy and freedom through military regime changes, occupations, threats, dictates, and ridiculously unrealistic transition plans to democratic sovereignty, such as is being reviewed now for Iraq, the majority of people in this region will probably say: thanks, but no thanks.

Because the indignities of being forced to change at the barrel of a gun, and according to Washington's dictates, are slightly greater than the dignities to be enjoyed from running your own democracy.

Both of these constraints should be easy to acknowledge and redress -- if

Washington has the humility to approach Middle Eastern democratization with

more sensitivity and realism, and if the peoples of the Middle East themselves muster the practical common sense to engage Washington in jointly defining realistic democratization priorities, goals, and modalities.

The flagrantly missing ingredient in this process remains consultations with the people of the Middle East, and hearing the indigenous voices that will ultimately define the nature, direction and speed of our own democratization. In 18th Century America this was called "the consent of the

governed". In the 21st Century Middle East also, this simple dictum ? rather

than speeches from the ranch or the garage ? remains the key to sensible democratization.

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