

MEPI may fail because of a 'blow-back' or resistance against an externally imposed model of democracy by what many regard as a discredited global power. (Johnson, 2000). This 'blow-back' is evidenced by the growth of a countervailing grassroots alliance against US hegemony such as the insurgency in Iraq and the spread of Islamic radicalism in general. Primarily, this paper examines how the problems that menace US's MEPI in general. Indirectly, the paper examines the implications of the Bush administration's pursuit of narrow plutocratic interests and its exercise of power without responsibility in multilateral governance.

### **The calamity of US unilateralism**

For many decades now, US foreign policy in general and particularly its belligerent policies under George Bush Jnr, has exhibited the tendencies or attributes characteristic of a reckless empire. Because of this, some scholars of American foreign policy have not shied away from comparing the US's current conduct in international affairs to that of Imperial Spain or the British empire at their decline around 1600 and 1900, respectively. (Kennedy, 1987) Since the end of the Cold War, the US has used its unrivalled military prowess and its dominant economic position, among other strategies, to ride

roughshod over international law in general. Besides using the threat of military force, the US has instrumentalised popular governance discourse on freedom, human rights and democracy to undermine countries it considers as threats. Also, believing in the virtues of its global mission, the US has grown ever more arrogant, unilateralist and isolationist, thereby succeeding in squandering international sympathy for its war on terror and losing international credibility in the process.

In their reaction to the US's new-found enthusiasm to 'liberate all the people of the Middle East from tyranny', (Michael Ledeen in *Wall Street Journal*, 4 September 2002) many Arab commentators have pushed the 'hidden agendas' theory based on three main arguments: first, the 'US call for democracy is a smokescreen to distract international public opinion from the real, hidden agendas in the region; second, the US has no credibility when it talks about democracy promotion, because of its past record [in the Middle East]; and third, 'the US has no right to interfere in the internal affairs of Arab countries.' Yet more other commentators see US interest in democracy 'as a means to extend American hegemony by lowering the resistance to [its] policies.' Thus, by extension, they regard the MEPI as 'a

means of pressuring Arab and Islamic governments and regimes to become more cooperative on Palestine, Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan and other areas.' (Ottaway, 2003).

While officials of the Bush administration have tried to brush aside this onslaught by arguing that the US only intends to use democracy to counter terrorism, accusations about the latter's lack of credibility on human rights and democracy have proved most difficult to deflect. Besides references to the US's global human rights record and even its domestic policies, the often sighted factors that stand as the real test on the US's own credibility have been the latter's own controversial policy on the Arab-Israeli conflict and its long standing association with corrupt and dictatorial Arab regimes in the Middle East. While segments of the Arab public want their governments to become more open and agree that something needs to be done to tackle the structural weaknesses in the body politic of the Middle East, they have also been quick to point to the curiously 'conspicuous absence of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the US's GMEI or MEPI. This has been interpreted as a clear indication of the US's total disregard for the rights of Palestinians and the Bush administration's tacit approval of Israel's continued occupation and expropriation of Palestinian land,

demolition of Palestinian houses, assassination of activists, ethnic cleansing and all-out state terror. (Ottaway, 2003) What is clear is that the US cannot hope to be taken seriously when its talk of democracy is contrasted with its inaction on the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories.

By far the most stinging criticism has been on the US's own long-standing association and support for autocratic Arab regimes that are willing to: 'accept US policies in the [region], maintain the status quo, and supply the US with abundant and cheap oil.' (Ottaway, 2003) Having traded democracy and human rights in exchange for stability and oil for several decades, many observers were surprised when in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the US suddenly identified the absence of democracy in the region as a serious problem and cause of terror. Not surprisingly, the MEPI was received, as a threat by some of the Middle East leadership's whose longevity the US has guaranteed for many years. Ironically, the September 11 attackers had directed their efforts against the US rather than their own governments, as could be expected from people angered by the repression at home. (Carothers, *Foreign Affairs*, January-February 2003: 84-97) Perhaps an even bigger irony is the US's rather simplistic interpretation of the causes of terrorism which conveniently underplays the fact that

the September 11 attackers had lived in the US for many years and had been educated there. A particularly interesting observation is that most of the critics of the MEPI have also come from the Arab intellectual elite 'whose involvement will be crucial to any process of democratisation.'<sup>3</sup>

What the above shows is that the US's policies have had and are having a lot of negative consequences. Rather than being seen as a force for stabilization, many progressive scholars and observers in the Middle East regard the US as a terrorist state and a danger to regional and global security. Even if the US may be interested in promoting reform and democracy even for instrumental reasons, observers may be advised to consider US foreign policy in its current global context and more specifically, to its contribution in the social construction of the repressive political landscape in the Middle East. This context or backdrop should provide

---

<sup>3</sup> Most of the critics 'are well educated, often in the West. They have all had some exposure to the West. Many have lived in the US, were happy there, and like going back on visits. They are, in other words, the people who could be expected to have the greatest interest in and aspirations for democracy. Yet their suspicion of the US leads them to concentrate on what they perceive to be the hypocrisy and contradictions of US policy, rather than on the problems of their own political systems.' M. Ottaway, *Promoting Democracy in the Middle East: The Problem of US Credibility*, Middle East Series Working Paper No. 35, (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2003), 7.

the canvas on which any permutations on the success and or failure of US foreign policy on reform in the Middle East should be made.

### **Problems with 'force-fed' democracy in the Middle East**

Regardless of its crisis of credibility, the US is determined to press on with its plans for exporting democratic reform to the Middle East. Although there have been reports suggesting divisions between moderates in favour of a more conciliatory and gradualist approach on the one hand, and neo-conservative hawks who want the US to take a hard-line position against 'autocratic regimes' on the other, many observers believe that deep down the Bush administration is determined to 'force-feed' democracy through force if necessary. Such fears are understandable in light of: first, belligerent statements emerging from the White House; second, the presence of US military bases on the Arabian peninsula; third, and most importantly, the obvious disparities in resources allocated to the US's over developed military strategy in the region compared to the total set aside for the implementation of MEPI.

What should be interesting for historians is that the divisions within the White House about which approach to take in the Middle East mirrors

precisely the debate that exercised the minds of American liberals and neo-conservatives on how to promote human rights and democracy in the old Soviet Union in the 1970s. The debate culminated in the signing of the Helsinki Accords in 1975.<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, the belligerent statements that came from some of the neo-conservative ideologues of the Helsinki debate to the effect that the GMEI or MEPI needed to be a replay of the Helsinki agreements has left many intellectuals convinced that the US is using democracy to roll back Islam in the same way it destroyed communism in the name of democracy. Thus, to the extent that the only common denominator shared by countries targeted by MEPI is the Muslim religion, many have drawn the conclusion the enemy is Islam and not dictatorship.<sup>5</sup> The parallel and simple equation drawn by US officials between communism and Islam is bound to generate a lot of resistance from large segments of Middle Eastern society in general. (*Liberation*, 6 and 11 March 2004)

---

<sup>4</sup> The signatories included the United States, the Soviet Union and most European nations. Human rights and democracy became a key part of the Helsinki Accords, which gave Washington leverage to speak up for dissident groups in communist Europe and to lobby for greater freedoms.

<sup>5</sup> The GMEI simply lumps Arab countries together with countries as diverse as Bangladesh.

In light of the above, there is no doubt that other similarly belligerent statements issued by the senior White House officials explicitly equating democracy promotion with regime change in Iraq and Palestine only served to reinforce the feeling that the US's reform agenda is only aimed at facilitating regime change rather than promoting genuine or home-grown democracy. For example, during an interview with the *Financial Times* on 23 September 2003 the then National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice openly declared that the 'march of freedom in the Muslim world' would be guaranteed by the removal of President Saddam Hussein from power (*Financial Times*, 23 September 2003) more or less in the same way genuine reform in the Palestinian territory would be ensured by preventing the late President Yasser Arafat from running 'for office – and win [ning] again.' (Ottaway, 2003)

Perhaps a similarly great challenge that has dogged US policy in the Middle East is how to differentiate the objectives of the MEPI, a supposedly diplomatic initiative on the one hand, and its overdeveloped regional military strategy on the other. While some pro-reform observers believe that US pressure could substitute for the Middle East's lack of an engine for internal reform, many Arab commentators feel that resources set aside for democracy,

development and education under the MEPI (\$29 million in 2003) was an insult. Critics were quick to compare the paltry sum allocated to the MEPI with the tens of billions the US has spent on the war in Iraq. (Ottaway, 2003) To make matters worse, such critics are also angered by the fact that the MEPI figure further pales into insignificance, especially in the face of the amounts the US has already spent on maintaining its vast array of strategic military commitments across the oil rich countries of the Middle East. Currently, hundreds of thousands of US troops are either stationed in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar or are actively serving in parts of Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan to subdue resistance against military occupation.

The aggressive posture of these military deployments across the region clearly indicate the US's intention to use force to achieve its policy objectives. Only recently, the US announced that it was not ruling the use of force against Iran if tensions over the latter's nuclear programme boil over. Syria also remains in the sights of the US over its alleged involvement in the destabilization of Lebanon and support of the insurgency in Iraq. This scenario has left many governments in the region wandering who is next on the list of US military targets. Not surprisingly, some observers strongly believe that as soon

as the US has secured alternative sources of oil, it will push its regime change agenda across the region much more aggressively. Such observations may explain why the stabilization of Iraq will be a crucial turning point in the Bush administration's policy in the Middle East. (*Gulf in a Year*, 2003: 115). On another level, the US strategy is also weakened by contradictions as shown by its readiness to support groups that lack credibility and whose level of domestic support is not known. For instance, the US has had dealings with the Iraq-based Iranian opposition, the Mujahideen e-Khalq Organization, an organization the US has previously labelled as a 'terrorist' organisation. For a start, such contradictions place US's GMEI plan closer to past cold war practices of using the 'enemy-of-enemy-is-my-friend' strategies that saw the US support the Taliban against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s. The danger is that there is sufficient residual memory in the Middle East on how the US quickly declared the Taliban as terrorists when it felt they had outlived their usefulness. The irony is that while operating in a region replete with examples where former allies such as the Taliban in Afghanistan have now become the hunted, the US seems bent on repeating past mistakes.

Interestingly, in the case of Iraq and Afghanistan, past US policies were

largely responsible for the systematic destruction of the institution of the state. By so doing, such US policies were the main source of the current instability and violence. The irony is that while Afghanistan and Iraq are still in the grip of war and military occupation, the US pushed for elections there. The elections, which were held in an atmosphere of fear and violence, were supervised by the US military and not by impartial international observers. This contrasts with the Bush administration's policy on free and fair elections. Despite the fact that elections referred to above were neither free nor fair, the US has paraded them to the international community as the turning point in the Middle East's so-called 'march to freedom.' Not surprisingly, local observers have dismissed the new governments in both countries as puppets of the US.

Furthermore, few believe that the US will be prepared to accept emboldened governments that are uninterested in doing the US's bidding. 'Given the political mood of most Arab citizens – who are angry at the US and sympathetic political Islam – free and open elections could result in some distinctly unfriendly regimes.' (Ottaway and Carothers, 2004) Because of their long struggle against US policies in the region, radical Islamist parties generally seem to be more organised. Over the

decades, radical parties have built their following with an easy mixture of ideological fervour and religious fundamentalist doctrine. Some examples of such parties include Hamas in Palestine, the MKO in Iran and Al-Islah in Yemen. As the case of Iraq shows, any attempts to marginalised radical Islamic parties (as the US is wont to do) will make it very difficult for democracy to be sustained.

In the end, the US may be advised to gauge the global reaction to its newfound messianism in the Middle East. The US's growing unilateralism and its disregard for the United Nations over the invasion of Iraq alienated critical world support that would have brought legitimacy to its current reform agenda. During the opening of the Africa Conference on Elections, Democracy and Governance, in 2003, South Africa's President, Thabo Mbeki underscored the counter-productive nature of the US's approach to democratic reform in Iraq when he said that: the prospect facing the people of Iraq should serve as sufficient warning that in future we too might have others descend on us, guns in hand to force-feed us [with democracy] ... If the UN does not matter ... why should we, the little countries of Africa that make up the African Union, think that we matter

and will not be punished if we get out of line?<sup>6</sup>

The point President Mbeki sought to drive home was that democracy couldn't be imposed from outside or 'force-fed.' More importantly, President Mbeki was saying that democracy couldn't be an exclusive export of the US because many other countries with functioning democracies were clearly interested in the continued development of the democratic process within their own governments and neighbourhoods. The issue was that even small and powerless countries want democracy, but on their own terms. In other words, the growth of democracy across the globe will be better served and protected, not by the depredations of a rapacious world superpower or external force, but rather by the participation of and support from a strong, representative and democratic global multilateral system led by the United Nations.

### **Conclusion**

A solution imposed from the outside, especially from the US, which is unpopular, will always be considered unacceptable by Arab nationalism.

---

<sup>6</sup> President Mbeki, Address at the Opening of the Africa Conference on Elections, Democracy and Governance, Johannesburg, (7 April 2003)

Simply labelling anti-US nationalist movements or groups as terrorists and having them hunted down will not bring democracy to the Middle East. 'Force-feeding' democracy or initiating 'democratic tsunamis' may actually be as destructive as aerial bombing was to the objective of winning the hearts and minds of people of the region. But most of all, no solution to the political, diplomatic, economic and social problems of the Arab world can be achieved, unless a solution is found for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The problem is that while the Palestinian-Israeli question raises anger and hate in the Middle East, the crisis is curiously missing in the American GMEI. Furthermore, given their long and negative experience with successive rightwing administrations in Washington, Arab public opinion is unlikely to accept American rightwing diktats anymore. Even if the US may be interested in democracy for instrumental reasons, only a handful of fair weather political movements may be tempted to regard its motives as altruistic. Either way, the US will have to contend with the 'blow-back' from its terrible past and present policies.

### **Policy Options**

1. ***The Middle East is the world's major source of oil:*** The Arab Peninsula is of strategic economic

importance for the world economy and for the economies of the global South in particular. The current oil crisis dictates that South Africa doubles its diplomatic efforts in trying to find home-grown, lasting and legitimate solutions to the political crisis in the Middle East.

2. **Multilateralism remains central to the spread of democracy:**

Whatever South Africa decides to do must be executed within the United Nations multilateral system. To avoid isolation, South Africa therefore, needs to steer away from being drawn into the unilateral ventures associated with US policies in the Middle East and elsewhere.

3. **International credibility is central to an effective foreign policy:**

The numerous problems that menace current US foreign policy in the Middle East clearly demonstrate the critical importance of international credibility in any country's foreign policy. Credibility acts a reservoir of goodwill from which a country can draw on to further its foreign policy agenda.

4. **The Israeli-Palestinian Question remains central to solving the problem of instability:**

South Africa is part of the solution to a crisis that remains a real test case for the establishment of lasting and credible peace in the Middle East in general. The

presence of a large Moslem community and Jewish diaspora in South Africa could provide an opportunity for initiating dialogue between Jews and Palestinians. It therefore, becomes important for South Africa to adopt a neutral position so as not to diminish its influence in this important region.

**Dr Nhamo W. Samasuwo is Programme Director: Multilateral, and**

**Dr Siphamandla Zondi is Programme Director: Africa and Southern Africa Programme,**

**Suggested readings**

1. FAS, 'US Foreign Policy: will there be more unilateralism?' <http://www.fas.org/news/usa/2001/usa-010223.htm>
2. E. Hobsbawn, 'After winning the War: United States still wider and wider,' *Le Monde Diplomatique*, (June, 2003).
3. 'Who are the Americans to think that freedom is theirs to spread?' *New York Times*, 26 June 2005.
4. 'Bases, Bases Everywhere. Pentagon planning in Iraq' in <http://www.tomsdipatch.com>



5. R. Howard, *Iran in Crisis: Nuclear Ambitions and the American Response*, (London, 2004).
6. *The First Annual Report, The Gulf in a Year, 2003* (Gulf Research Centre, January 2004)
7. Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The costs and consequences of American Empire*, (Henry Holt, 2000).
8. M. Ottaway and T. Carothers, 'Think Again: Middle East Democracy,' <http://www.foreignpolicy.com>
9. (November, 2004); M. Ottaway, T. Carothers, A.Hawthorne and D. Brunmberg, 'Democratic Mirage in the Middle East,' *Foreign Policy Brief*, Democracy and Rule of Law Project, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 20 October 2002); M. Ottaway, 'Promoting Democracy in the Middle East: The problem of US credibility,' *Middle East Series Working Papers*, No. 35 (Carnegie Endowment for Peace, March 2003).
10. Colin Powell, 'The U.S. Middle East Partnership Initiative: Building hope for the Years Ahead,' Speech delivered to the Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, D.C., 12 December 2002; available at

<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2002/15920.htm>.

11. R. Burbach and J. Tarbell, *Imperial Overstretch: George Bush and the Hubris of Empire*, (London, 2004)

**NOW AVAILABLE FROM IGD:**

**THE MAKING OF A REGION:  
The Revival of the East African  
Community**

**Edited by Rok Ajulu**

