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Senat 294 on Policy Issues:

Democratization of the Arab World: A Shattered Vision

Main Conclusion:

- The American vision of a democratized Arab world suffered from several serious flaws due, among other things, to the failure to incorporate the lessons learned from the abortive British attempt to impose western democracy in the area.
- All Shiite streams view democratization as a mechanism to improve their lowly status and transform Iraq into the region's new Shiite centre.
- The Sunnis adamantly oppose democratization for obvious reasons: democratization would deprive them of their superior position in Iraq's governing regime.
- All these visions conflict when attempting to translate them into reality.
- Democratization is the victim of a vicious cycle in which sudden freedom and liberalization set the stage for Islamic extremists to gain control of Iraq's political arena, with each faction attempting, in turn, to strangle the process in its infancy.
- One ray of light has emerged: Contemporary Iraq is divided into two segments, one Arab, the other Kurd. Whereas the Arab segment is caught in a serious identity crisis and may be on the brink of civil war, the Kurdish segment is flourishing.
- The promising "Lebanese Spring," involving installation of a democratic, stable and prosperous government was likewise short-lived.
- In sum, the first serious attempt in the twenty-first century to inaugurate a democratic revolution in the Middle East can be labelled as premature.

Three years after publication of the ambitious program for a new, more democratic Middle East, it seems appropriate to re-examine the successes as well as failures of the program by reviewing the developments in Iraq, the country meant to spearhead the process. Democratization in Iraq should be examined along three distinct but interrelated dimensions: vision, implementation and outcomes.

The main argument developed here is that along each of these dimensions, serious flaws appeared as a result of the structural incompatibility between the internal and external entities designated to realize this project.

The root of the problem lies in the various, contradictory visions that guided the main actors on the democratization issue. The US initiated the project according to the vision of a "rolling democracy", a "positive" domino effect in which Iraq's democratization would radiate on other Arab states in a manner similar to the progress in the former Soviet Union. The models before US policymakers were those of post World War II Germany and Japan. The decision to initiate the "Iraqi process" was supported by Iraqi exiles who were able to convince America's political leadership that Iraq was ripe for a democratic revolution.

The serious shortcomings in the US vision resulted from the leadership's inability to learn from Britain's unsuccessful attempt to impose western democracy in Iraq. US policymakers failed to identify the essential difference between the successful examples of Germany and Japan and the conditions found in Iraq, an Islamic-tribal society potentially resistant to democratization. They also failed to discern the dilemma created by the necessity of choosing between a democratization process that would necessarily encourage Islamic factions within the various Arab countries in the region and the need to support pro-US yet patently anti-democratic regimes. Hence, the US vision was destined to clash with the divergent visions promoted by the various Iraqi camps.

Among the Iraqis themselves, three positions have evolved with respect to democracy, associated with distinct ethnic-religious divisions. The Kurds have historically held onto the dictum "Democracy for Iraq, autonomy for the Kurds." At the conclusion of the first Gulf War (1991), they raised the threshold of their demands from straightforward autonomy to democracy and federalism, and even succeeded in entering an article reflecting this position into the new Iraqi constitution, ratified in 2005. The Kurds have also aspired to the separation of church and state; given this objective, they appear to be the group closest to western positions on democracy.

Among the Shiites, three separate streams have formed with respect to attitudes toward democracy. The first stream, marginal in number and populated mainly by exiles living in the west, has embraced a western view of democracy; the second stream has adopted the model of "mass democracy"; the third stream views democracy as an instrument for establishing a theocratic regime. All three Shiite camps regard democratization as a mechanism for altering their inferior status in Iraqi society and for transforming Iraq into the Middle East's new centre of Shiite Islam.

The Sunnis represent the most adamant opponents to any democratic process, a position clearly emanating from a fear of losing their superiority within the Arab regime. Yet, two streams have emerged here as well. The first and more powerful stream is composed of all the Sunni factions waging a bloody, unrelenting war against any attempt to stabilize the country and successfully introduce democracy. The second stream; encompassing the new Islamist groups that burst forth from the ruins of the Baath regime, show some readiness to participate in the democratic game. They are less motivated by any belief in democracy than by the desire to enjoy the spoils of war in conjunction with foiling attempts made by the Shiites and the Kurds to seize the reins of power.

This plethora of visions has clashed with efforts at their implementation. The Sunnis have maintained their antagonism to establishment of a federal democracy, the Kurds have objected to Shiite attempts to rest the constitution on religious foundations and the Shiites are dragging their feet with respect to creating a federation while simultaneously expending efforts to impose the *Shari'a* (Islamic law) on daily life in those territories under their control. As to the Americans, they have been caught in the unavoidable conflict between ideology and interests on the one hand, on their insistent promotion of "democratization" and the need to establish a minimal basis of control in the midst of a conflagration that is thwarting even the slightest attempt to introduce a democratic process.

Adding to the turmoil is the deep chasm dividing the implementation of democratic processes – such as agreeing to a constitution, free elections and establishment of a parliament – that may function with some degree of success and long-term processes such as the institutionalization of a civil society that advocates democratic values and strongly upholds their penetration into everyday life. Other barriers to implementation of the American vision lie in the delegation of the responsibility for installing democracy to American members of the military, a decision inherently undermining achievement of such a goal. As a conquering power, the US has managed to drape democracy in black. The US decision to realize its vision in "Iraq first" was most unfortunate because the transition from such a stringent totalitarian regime to an open democratic regime generally requires many years before the transformation's fruits are ripe and capable of providing a positive example to other, in this case Arab states.

With respect to the outcomes, the impression is mixed although it tends toward the negative. The democratization process has been caught in a vicious cycle in which the abrupt freedom and liberalization facilitated the capture of Iraq's political arena by Islamic forces, followed by their attempts to squelch whatever budding democracy managed to appear. Proponents of liberalism, secularism and the (even minimal) separation of church and state were shoved aside, to lose whatever influence they had over the country's image and future. Terrorism has continued on a horrific scale, accompanied by daily acts of vengeance, religious warfare between the Sunnis and the Shiites, in tandem with spreading anarchy. Taken together, these acts have in effect eradicated any possibility of implementing the American vision in the near future.

Alternatively, one prominent ray of light can be seen. Contemporary Iraq is divided into two parts, one Arab, one Kurd. Whereas the Arab part is caught in a serious identity crisis and is perhaps verging on the brink of civil war, the Kurdish part is thriving. A variant of democratic governance is in place. Although it remains far from western models, it does display positive signs, such as the inauguration of a constitution, a parliament and free local elections. A balance of power has been sustained between the two major parties, coupled with continuing efforts to separate church from state. The relative stability and economic prosperity found in this part of Iraq have contributed significantly to the increasing democracy, a process that may radiate across the country in the future.

As to the "positive" domino theory, the outcomes observed remain far from the vision. Libya, a "pioneer" in the region's swing to the west, was not required to and in fact did not introduce any democratization domestically. Mubarak's Egypt has taken certain steps toward democratization but retreated at a critical junction; the US, which feared that democratization, would further strengthen fundamentalist Islam, retreated from the challenge and its pledge to assist liberal forces. In the Palestinian Authority, as expected, democratization led to the rise of the radical Hamas. At this point in time, the genie can no longer be forced back into the bottle. The promising "Lebanese Spring" also contributed little to sustain a stable, prosperous democratic regime. In Kuwait, although women were allowed to vote and even stand for election for the first time in history, the patriarchal spirit overcame flickers of progress and no woman was elected to parliament. In other countries as well, such as Saudi Arabia, the US appears to be more interested in promoting stability than democracy.

Another inkling of hope may perhaps be identified surprisingly in those arenas free of external intervention: For instance, significant freedom of speech can be found in the operation of the Al Jazeera television channel, in the flow of information and influence through the Internet and in the slow percolation of liberal ideas into some areas of the Arab discourse.

We can therefore summarize the first serious attempt in the twenty-first century as premature. Its lack of fruition can be attributed to the fact that it was forced upon Arab society by external forces, that the endeavour was conducted in a brazen fashion, that it placed the US before an impossible dilemma and that the target society had not yet experienced the prerequisite civil revolution. The democratic revolution anticipated in the Arab states will therefore have to wait.