



# **The United States and Democratization in the Gulf: An Uncertain Balance**

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In the aftermath of the Iraq War of 2003, when it became clear that the major public justification for the war, Saddam Hussein's possession of weapons of mass destruction, had no basis in fact, the Bush Administration quickly emphasized a new public justification for the war. Post-Saddam Iraq would become a democratic beacon in the Middle East, leading to more open politics throughout the region. It is very tempting to assume that this change of message is simply public relations, an insincere effort to sell a policy to both American public opinion and to the world. Undoubtedly, at least in the public presentation element, there is some truth to this assumption. However, it would be a mistake to see the American "democratization" initiative in the Middle East as merely a cover for other, more traditional great power motivations. I will make the case in this discussion paper that the Administration is sincere in its desire to spread democracy throughout the region. However, that sincerity is tempered by a number of problems of implementation in the Middle East, where traditional American interests in oil and the Arab-Israeli conflict have not disappeared. The combination of sincere desires and real obstacles yields an "uncertain balance" in the Bush Administration's approach to democratization in the Arab world, in the Gulf states in particular. That "uncertain balance" means that, over the next four years, while the rhetoric of democracy will continue to characterize American policy in the region, there will be little pressure from Washington for real democratic reforms in the area.

### **The American Democracy Push: Is It Sincere?**

It is undoubtedly true that the Bush Administration is a convert to democratization. The President campaigned against "nation-building,"



criticizing the Clinton Administration for dissipating American strength through commitments to marginal countries like Haiti and Bosnia. While not openly rejecting the spread of democracy as a policy goal during the 2000 campaign, President Bush and his aides made it clear that they had a more realpolitik notion of American interests in the world, focused on the other great powers and missile defense. But this recent conversion should not be taken as a sign, *ipso facto*, of insincerity. Converts can be the most committed of ideologues. The Bush Administration's conversion stems from what, for the United States, was an earth-shattering event, the attacks of September 11, 2001. It should not be surprising that, in the wake of such an event, the country's top policy-makers would re-evaluate their assumptions about American foreign policy.

The democracy theme appears in Administration statements very shortly after September 11, though in the lead-up to the Iraq War it was downplayed in favor of a public emphasis on weapons of mass destruction. This emphasis on the need for democratic reform in the Middle East is not simply a restatement of general American ideals, the kind of boilerplate that every American administration produces. It is part of an analysis of the roots of the September 11 attacks and anti-American terrorism in the Middle East and what the American response should be. The syllogism is simple: Authoritarian governments produce bad governance. Bad governance produces terrorist movements. Thus, to "get at the roots" of terrorism, good governance must be brought to the countries which produce terrorists. Good governance comes from democracy. It is useful to consider one of



President Bush's most recent articulations of this logic, from his speech at the U.S. Air Force Academy in June 2004, here quoted at length:<sup>1</sup>

Fighting terror is not just a matter of killing or capturing terrorists. To stop the flow of recruits into terrorist movements, young people in the region must see a real and hopeful alternative, a society that rewards their talent and turns their energies to constructive purpose. And here the vision of freedom has great advantages. Terrorists incite young men and women to strap bombs on their bodies and dedicate their deaths to the death of others. Free societies inspire young men and women to work and achieve and dedicate their lives to the life of their country...

Freedom's advance in the Middle East will have another, very practical effect. The terrorist movement feeds on the appearance of inevitability. It claims to rise on the currents of history, using past American withdrawals from Somalia and Beirut to sustain this myth and to gain new followers. The success of free and stable governments in Afghanistan and Iraq and elsewhere will shatter the myth and discredit the radicals. And as the entire region sees the promise of freedom in its midst, the terrorist ideology will become more and more irrelevant until that day when it is viewed with contempt or ignored altogether.

For decades, free nations tolerated oppression in the Middle East for the sake of stability. In practice, this approach brought little stability and much oppression, so I have changed this policy. In the short term, we will work with every government in the Middle East dedicated to destroying the terrorist networks. In the longer term, we will expect a higher standard of reform and democracy from our friends in the region. Democracy and reform will make those nations stronger and more stable, and make the world more secure by undermining terrorism at its source.

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<sup>1</sup> Text of the speech at [www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/06/20040602.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/06/20040602.html). Last accessed December 28, 2004.



This basic syllogism is open to much criticism. It is a debatable proposition that terrorism stems from a lack of democracy. It is a debatable proposition that, even if terrorism did stem from a lack of democracy, the most effective way to fight terrorism would be the extremely difficult task of democratizing a large number of countries which have, to now, been resistant to global democratization trends. However, this set of underlying assumptions has quickly become the conventional wisdom in American political circles. It is not the exclusive intellectual property of neo-conservatives.<sup>2</sup> Even those who oppose much of what the Bush Administration has done in the Middle East, or support the Administration's goals but are critical of its implementation strategy, accept these assumptions.

The campaign of Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry accepted the need for greater political reform in the Middle East as an integral part of the war on terrorism.<sup>3</sup> *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, America's leading commentator on foreign affairs, has done more to propound this syllogism to the attentive American public than anyone else.<sup>4</sup> A senior Middle East policy maker in the Clinton Administration, after September 11,

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<sup>2</sup> See Ronald D. Asmus and Kenneth M. Pollack, "The Neoliberal Take on the Middle East," *Washington Post*, July 22, 2003, where the authors contest many of the tactics of the Bush Administration's Middle East policy but accept the premise that political reform is essential for the war on terrorism.

<sup>3</sup> "We must support the development of free and democratic societies in the Arab and Muslim worlds to win the war of ideas...In a Kerry Administration, America will be clear with repressive governments in the region that we expect to see them change, not just for our sake but for their own survival." [www.johnkerry.com/issues/national\\_security/terrorism.html](http://www.johnkerry.com/issues/national_security/terrorism.html). Last accessed December 28, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> "There is no question that America can help by making a more energetic effort to defuse the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and by speaking out for the values that America has advocated everywhere in the world, except in the Arab world: namely democracy." *New York Times*, October 23, 2002. "Turkish politicians are not intimidated by religious fundamentalists, because, unlike too many Arab politicians, they have their own legitimacy that comes from being democratically elected." *New York Times*, January 11, 2004. "I heard Harvard's president, Lawrence Summers, say once that 'in the history of the world, no one has ever washed a rented car.' Ditto for countries. So many Arabs today feel that they are just renting their governments. They have no real ownership, and so don't feel responsible for solving their own problems. Bahrain took a small step last week toward giving its people ownership over their own country, and one can only hope they will take responsibility for washing it and improving it. Nothing could help this region more. There is hope." *New York Times*, October 27, 2002.



contended that the Administration he served had ignored the democracy issue in the pursuit of Arab-Israeli peace. In this prominent *mea culpa*, he said that strategy was a mistake and urged a new American policy focused on political reform.<sup>5</sup> A recent book published by the Council on Foreign Relations, whose lead author was the Director of Policy Planning in the Clinton State Department, argues that the roots of al-Qa'ida are in the poverty and educational deficiencies of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Pakistan. These deficiencies were caused by the authoritarian nature of those states, and can only be combated by their democratization.<sup>6</sup> The syllogism underlying the Bush Administration's emphasis on political reform in the Middle East as a necessary part of the war on terrorism is widely accepted, and is not going to disappear when the neo-conservatives leave office.

The Bush Administration's post-September 11 emphasis on democratic reform in the Middle East also has another set of roots, in the experience of what Samuel Huntington called the "Third Wave" of world-wide democratization in the 1980's and 1990's.<sup>7</sup> The democratic changes that occurred in Latin America, East Asia and Eastern Europe during that period overwhelmingly brought to power governments which were in tune with Washington's desires. Elections produced pro-Western leaders in Eastern Europe who sought to join NATO and aligned their foreign policies with those of the United States. Elected Latin American governments adopted the "Washington consensus" of economic reform. Elected Asian governments

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<sup>5</sup> Martin Indyk, "Back to the Bazaar," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Morton H. Halperin, Joseph T. Siegle and Michael M. Weinstein, *The Democracy Advantage: How Democracies Promote Prosperity and Peace*, (New York: Routledge for the Council on Foreign Relations, 2004), Chapter 5: "In short, even as new security threats emerge in the twenty-first century, one thing remains constant: authoritarian governments are at the source." p. 121.

<sup>7</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).



maintained close ties with the United States and continued the economic policies of their authoritarian predecessors that had created the East Asian “economic miracle.” In short, democracy produced pro-American governments. So the United States could have its cake and eat it, too: democracy promotion produced governments in accord with American interests **and** American values. That combination is very difficult for an American politician to resist.

This rosy overview of recent history is not completely accurate. Democratic processes are now bringing to power in Latin America populist leaders who do not toe the American line (Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, for example). Washington has found it difficult, at times, to coordinate policy toward North Korea with the democratic government in Seoul. It remains to be seen whether democratic governments in Eastern Europe will remain committed to free market democracy. But, as the recent events in Ukraine reinforced once again, for some time now the perception in Washington has been that real democracy produces governments that are pro-American. That general belief helps to buttress the strategic syllogism relating to terrorism to bad governance and authoritarianism that underlies the Bush Administration’s democratization policy in the Middle East.

### **Democratization Implementation: Some Middle Eastern Problems**

I argue above that the Bush Administration is sincere in its rhetorical commitment to a policy of democratization in the Middle East. It is not simply a smokescreen to cover up more traditional great power goals of regional domination and specific long-time American support for Israel. But the strategic, economic and political interests that brought the United States



into the Middle East decades ago – support for Israel and interest in the oil resources of the Gulf (along with global containment of the Soviet Union) are still present. Add to those enduring interests the new American focus of the war on terrorism, and the need for the cooperation of Middle Eastern governments in that primary American policy goal. The Bush Administration recognizes that robust democracy promotion might put at risk the securing these other interests. The unpopularity of the United States in the Arab world is such that democratic governments would undoubtedly be less willing than the current incumbents to cooperate with Washington. Persuading governments to put their hold on power at risk is difficult enough, but even more so when you are, at the same time, asking them to take all sorts of controversial domestic and foreign policy steps as part of the American war on terrorism. There is no guarantee that democratic Arab governments would be more willing to accept peace with Israel on terms acceptable to Israel and the United States. On the contrary, there are indications that popular political forces in both Egypt and Jordan which would benefit from real democratization, like the Muslim Brotherhood, are much less committed to the existing peace treaties with Israel than the incumbent governments.

The dilemma for the Bush Administration here is neatly encapsulated in the current controversy over the release of the third Arab Human Development Report. The Administration has praised the first two reports as guideposts for economic, educational and political reform in the region. The third report, concentrating on governance issues in the Arab world, is expected to provide similar support for democratization efforts. However, Washington has held up approval of the document because the authors are critical of American policy on Iraq and of Israel, and thus delayed its publication by the





United Nations.<sup>8</sup> Earlier this year, Washington pointedly excluded Qatar from the list of countries it invited to attend the G-8 summit in Georgia which adopted the “Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative” on political and social reform. Qatar is an important American strategic ally (the major American air base in the Gulf is in Qatar, as was the regional headquarters of Centcom during the Iraq War) and is taking steps to expand political participation. However, it also is the headquarters of the *al-Jazeera* satellite television station, seen by many in Washington as anti-American.<sup>9</sup> Freedom and democratization mean more possibilities to be critical of the United States, and this is a difficult for Washington to accept.

The trepidations in the Bush Administration about fully committing to their own logic about the need for political reform in the Middle East go beyond the obvious fact that the United States is unpopular in the region, particularly in the Arab world. Two other facts give the would-be American reformers pause. First, there is a fear, justified by recent history, that free elections in the Middle East would bring Islamists to power, and that Islamists governments would not be willing to cooperate with the United States on war on terrorism issues or on Arab-Israeli issues, and would be much less receptive to American pressure on oil issues. As the strong showing by Hamas in the Palestinian municipal elections of December 2004 demonstrated, when there are free elections in the Arab world, Islamist parties and groups do very well. Washington, needless to say, does not want to see Islamist governments in Arab states, if it can help it.

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, “Holding Up Arab Reform,” New York Times, December 16, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Steven R. Weisman, “Bush Plan for Group of 8 to Hail Democracy in the Middle East Strains Ties with Arab Allies,” New York Times, June 6, 2004.



While it is not mentioned in the public pronouncements in favor of Arab democracy coming out of Washington, there is a recognition that the “Third Wave” experience of democracy producing pro-American governments in Latin America, East Asia and Eastern Europe would not likely be repeated in the Arab world. In these cases, the “Left” had collapsed. There was no viable political alternative to free market democracy in the field. It was highly likely, if not inevitable, that elections would produce pro-American governments in these areas. So the United States could be in favor of elections without threatening its interests. However, in the Arab world there is an alternative political ideology, Islamism. Real democracy runs the risk, the likelihood, that Islamist parties would come to power.

The second fact giving American policy-makers pause as they consider their new commitment to political reform in the Arab world is what is happening in Iraq. In the rosy neo-conservative scenario before the Iraq War, Iraq by now should have been a functioning democracy with a pro-American government. The example of Iraqi democracy should have had a demonstration effect in the region, encouraging grass-roots pressure for democratic change elsewhere. Instead, Iraq is what it is. It is not a model that others would want to follow. Elections, if they are successful, will likely produce a government dominated by Shi’i Islamist and clerical factions – not what Washington bargained for at all. The growing Iraqi insurgency has reinforced America’s dependence upon its non-democratic regional allies for political and logistical support, making it more difficult to press them for democratic reform. As long as Iraq, which Washington had hoped would be a beacon for democracy in the region, is a testament to the problems of American-driven political change, the overall American democracy agenda will be stymied.



## **American Policy and Democratization: An Uncertain Balance**

I have argued above that the American push for political reform in the region is sincere, because it is seen as an integral part of an anti-terrorism strategy. However, Washington sees that the implementation of real democratic change in the Arab world could immediately work against a whole range of important American interests. What has emerged from this tension is an uncertain balance in Bush Administration efforts on the political reform question: a real commitment at the diplomatic level and a number of “on-the-ground” programs aimed at regional reform, but a willingness to “define democracy down” so that friendly states can meet Bush Administration reform targets without risking real democratic political change.

The seriousness of the Bush Administration’s effort is exemplified by a number of high-level diplomatic initiatives taken over the last year. Washington put the issue of Middle East reform on the agenda of the 2004 G-8 summit. Its original proposal (leaked to *al-Hayat* newspaper) elicited protests from Arab rulers and calls for scaling back some of its ambitions by Europeans.<sup>10</sup> The summit declaration adopted in June 2004 was still the most focused international statement on political, economic and social reform in the Middle East ever issued by a great power grouping. It created a “Partnership for Progress and a Common Future” that would work with regional states and with regional non-governmental organizations to “strengthen freedom, democracy and prosperity for all.” On the political side, the declaration called for “progress toward democracy and the rule of law, [which] entails instituting effective guarantees in the areas of human

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<sup>10</sup> The original U.S. draft can be found in *al-Hayat*, February 13, 2004.



rights and fundamental freedoms, which notably imply respect for diversity and pluralism.” The declaration also established a ministerial-level “Forum for the Future” for on-going discussion of these issues.<sup>11</sup>

The United States paid some (though not an extensive) diplomatic price for this initiative. Both President Mubarak and Crown Prince Abdallah refused invitations to attend the G-8 summit meeting, expressing their displeasure at the declaration. President Bush indirectly criticized Egypt and Saudi Arabia for their lack of political freedoms in a speech in late June 2004 in Istanbul, after the NATO summit: “Suppressing dissent only increases radicalism. The long-term stability of any government depends on being open to change and responsive to citizens.”<sup>12</sup> In that same vein, earlier in the year Secretary of State Powell on a visit to Riyadh publicly criticized the Saudi government for its detention of reform advocates.<sup>13</sup> These are not the kinds of steps, or the kinds of statements, that the United States made in the past. They are an indication that Washington’s call for political reform in the region is not simply verbiage.

However, the hesitations in implementing these broad rhetorical commitments were clear by the end of 2004. The first meeting of the “Forum for the Future” established at the G-8 summit was held in Morocco on December 11, 2004. While Secretary of State Powell attended and spoke of the need for Arab states to adopt a reform agenda, the United States suggested nothing in terms of practical steps to push the Arab leaders in that direction. Before the meeting, American officials let it be known that

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<sup>11</sup> The final draft of the summit declaration can be found at: [www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/06/20040609-30.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/06/20040609-30.html)

<sup>12</sup> Mike Allen, “Bush Chides U.S. Allies in Mideast,” *Washington Post*, June 30, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Steven R. Weisman, “Powell Asserts Saudi Bond Despite Rift,” *New York Times*, March 20, 2004.



they had no more than modest hopes for the meeting, and intended to stress economic reform issues because the high levels of anti-American feeling in the region made democracy initiatives risky.<sup>14</sup> The only initiatives announced at the meeting were programs to combat illiteracy and to provide financing for small businesses. Italy, Turkey and Yemen agreed to manage a program called Democracy Assistance Dialogue which plans to hold meetings beginning in 2005 on subjects like women's rights and freedom of the press.<sup>15</sup> More such meetings hardly constitute serious pressure on Arab governments for real steps toward democracy. American policymakers indirectly acknowledge that their rhetoric on the democracy issue in the region should not be read as an immediate policy blueprint. When Secretary of State- designate Condoleezza Rice called the transformation of the Middle East a "generational commitment,"<sup>16</sup> the implicit message is that no one should expect much progress soon.

The one American democracy-promotion effort in the region that is actually up and running, the Middle East Partnership Initiative, also betrays this "uncertain balance." On the one hand, the MEPI is a serious commitment of American resources on an issue that, in the region, had not received much if any attention. Over the last two years MEPI has been allocated \$264 million to promote economic, educational and political reform and women's empowerment in the region, of which it has spent just over \$103 million as of November 2004. 33% of that amount has been spent on political reform

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<sup>14</sup> Joel Brinkley, "U.S. Slows Bid to Advance Democracy in the Arab World," New York Times, December 5, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Joel Brinkley, "Arab and Western Ministers Voice Difference Priorities," New York Times, December 12, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> Remarks by National Security Advisor Dr. Condoleezza Rice at 28<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the National Association of Black Journalists, August 7, 2003, [www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/08/20030807-1.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/08/20030807-1.html).



projects.<sup>17</sup> In the Gulf, MEPI has opened a field office in the UAE, sponsored a “Gulf Regional Campaign School” in Doha in February 2004 for candidates for office from the GCC states (and Yemen) with a focus on women candidates and funded a number of projects to support elections, legislatures, free media, civic education, judicial independence, women’s rights, trade and WTO accession activities.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, almost none of the MEPI activities directly pressures Arab governments to democratize. Over 70% of its grants so far were distributed “to programs that either directly benefited Arab government agencies (in activities ranging from translating documents to computerizing schools) or provided training programs and seminars for Arab government officials (including ministry bureaucrats, parliamentarians and judges). Only 18% of the allocated funds supported either American or Arab non-governmental organizations working in the region.” Only about 5% of the total has been directed to local NGO’s working on reform and human rights issues.<sup>19</sup> The authors of the only comprehensive analysis of MEPI activity concluded that “MEPI has chosen to nibble at the margins of the reform problem by funding a wide variety of uncontroversial programs and largely working within the boundaries set by Arab governments.”<sup>20</sup> In all, the general consensus among informed observers of the Bush Administration’s

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<sup>17</sup> Tamara Cofman Wittes and Sarah E. Yerkes, “The Middle East Partnership Initiative: Progress, Problems and Prospects,” Saban Center Memo #5, November 29, 2004, Brookings Institution. [www.brookings.edu/views/op-ed/fellows/wittes20041129.htm](http://www.brookings.edu/views/op-ed/fellows/wittes20041129.htm)

<sup>18</sup> A full list of Middle East Partnership Initiative activities can be found at <http://mepi.state.gov>. Lists of specific projects, including those funded in the Gulf states, can be found in the sections for the four “pillars” of MEPI – economic, political, educational and women’s issues – under the “programs” section.

<sup>19</sup> Wittes and Yerkes, “The Middle East Partnership Initiative.”

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



efforts to promote political reform in the Middle East is “close, but no democracy.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Conclusion: The Bush Administration, Democratization and the Gulf**

The “uncertain balance” in the Bush Administration’s approach to democratization will continue to be reflected in its policies toward the Gulf states. On the one hand, we can expect to see more of the kind of diplomatic tensions that characterized Saudi-American relations in 2004: public statements by the President, the Secretary of State and other officials that directly or indirectly criticize Gulf state governments, particularly Saudi Arabia, for denial of political freedoms and lack of progress on reform, and Gulf state government reactions accusing the United States of meddling in those states’ internal affairs. With the bureaucratization of the American reform effort in the region, through MEPI and the Forum for the Future, these reform issues will be on the agenda in the bilateral relationships between the U.S. and GCC members for some time.

At the same time, it is clear that the United States is not going to push very hard for real democratization, defined in terms of free elections to real legislatures and real controls over executive authority. The United States has made clear that it sees its democratization program as a long-term venture, not a short-term goal. Much of the actual emphasis in its reform agenda is on issues that are not troublesome to Gulf governments – economic development, educational reform, etc. The Bush Administration

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<sup>21</sup> Ray Takeyh, “Close, But No Democracy,” The National Interest, No. 78, Winter 2004/05. “And so Washington’s strategy of political change, endorsed by both parties, follows a well-worn path of promoting liberalization rather than genuine democratization. And, as a result, a strategy of incremental liberalization necessarily conforms to the parameters established by the incumbent regimes.” p. 57.



has also made clear, through its praise for the Kuwaiti, Bahraini and Omani legislative experiments, the new Qatari constitution, the economic dynamism of the UAE and Saudi Arabia's 2005 municipal elections, that small steps on the democratic road will be more than enough, in the short term, to satisfy Washington. "Reform," including political reform, is on the agenda. But the old agenda items are still there in the relationship, and reform will not overshadow them.

Two uncertainties remain in how Washington's democratization initiatives will work themselves out in the future. The first is the Iraqi situation. If, against the current evidence, Iraq over the next few years experiences a stable transition to a real democracy, the Bush Administration may be emboldened to push the democracy agenda more seriously than it is willing to do now. If Iraq remains a troubled and violent place, the Bush Administration will not be able to point to it as a democratic success to be emulated in the region. Moreover, the U.S. will need the cooperation of regional actors, including the Gulf state, that much more if Iraq continues on its current path, pushing the reform issue further down the agenda in bilateral relations.

The second uncertainty is how the second term Bush Administration will define its quest for democracy in the Middle East. The choice before it is somewhat analogous to the different approaches taken by the Carter and Reagan Administrations on the issue of human rights. The Carter Administration elevated human rights issues in the agenda with friendly authoritarian states like Chile and Iran. The Reagan Administration emphasized the human rights issue in dealing with unfriendly states like the Soviet Union and its Eastern European client states. So far, the Bush





Administration has played both cards in its reform rhetoric – talking about the need for democracy in unfriendly states like Saddam’s Iraq, Iran and Syria **and** in friendly authoritarian regimes like Egypt and Saudi Arabia. It is entirely possible over the next four years that the Administration will choose to emphasize one of these two approaches. Given how similar this Bush presidency is to that of Ronald Reagan, if such a choice is made it will likely be in a Reaganesque direction.