

Rethinking Post-Conflict Democratization In the Middle East

For many critics of American interventionism, democracy promotion in the Middle East is synonymous with imperialism, albeit more refined so as to veil its ultimately hegemonic goals. Oft-cited examples of failed attempts to promote democracy in the region include the US invasion of Iraq, the coalition invasion of Afghanistan, and international military intervention in Libya. Each of these instances was an attempt to instate democracy in a nation through military force, and each seems to have failed spectacularly.

What the critics who summon these examples fail to realize is that democratization might have been successful; in fact, democratization was partially successful in Afghanistan. Detractors of intervention also ignore the notion that the Middle East might have been even more unstable if international actors had declined to intervene.

Although the current democratic government of Afghanistan is widely considered to be corrupt, it has managed to maintain far more stability than its predecessor, the Taliban regime, which was notorious for its human rights violations and incubation of terrorist groups. Iraq and Libya only became the failed states they are today because of poor planning and lack of sustained support for democratization. Because the Western nations that intervened failed to understand the potentially dangerous consequences of rushing to democracy, the situations in several Middle Eastern countries deteriorated rapidly.

The precedent that Bush-era interventionism has set, however, doesn't preclude policy change in the future; in fact, it presents important lessons from which current policymakers can learn. The first, and perhaps most important, conclusion to draw from the failures of past intervention in the Middle East is that the United States should only intervene in a nation should the government of that nation pose an imminent threat to American safety. The NATO invasion of Afghanistan was effective in large part because--unlike the Iraq War--it was widely accepted by the international community as justified due to the immediate threat the Taliban posed. Without condonement by other international actors and by a significant population of the Middle East, the US mission in Afghanistan would have been violently rejected, which is exactly what occurred in Iraq.

America's poor track record in the Middle East also teaches another important lesson: how to best approach the process of democratization. This undertaking is a slow and arduous one, and our country has historically failed to recognize that fact. In the past, American forces have often withdrawn after a post-conflict nation's first series of elections, but this isn't enough. Neither is settling for corruption within a nascent democracy. Departing from an unstable country too quickly can leave that country's government weak and vulnerable, and accepting cronyism in a newly formed democracy can undermine that government's legitimacy, eliminating any chances it might have had for success.

What all this means is not that America should retreat from the Middle East or that it should not continue to spread democracy throughout the world. In fact, America should by all

means maintain its efforts to democratize authoritarian countries in the Middle East and elsewhere. It should just do so using a new, healthier paradigm.