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U.S. Policy: Hypocrisy, Principles, and Reform in the Middle East

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Observers have criticized the United States strongly for its unwillingness to recognize the Hamas government in Palestine, as well as for appearing to back away from supporting reform in Egypt after the Muslim Brotherhood's strong showing in 2005 elections. It seems that Washington is only interested in democratic development to the extent that this process brings to power groups and individuals that meet the approval of the United States, leading to accusations of U.S. double-standards. The problem for the Bush administration is not that it is no longer interested in promoting democratic reform. Rather, the problem is that the Bush administration has not forcefully upheld key democratic principles such as non-violence and the rule of law. Ironically, it is Washington's strenuous effort not to appear to be imposing its agenda on the Arab world that has led to charges of hypocrisy.

There is much that is laudable in Washington's push for democracy in the Arab world. Since 2003 President Bush, his two Secretaries of State, and a variety of other senior officials have spoken publicly and forcefully in favor of change in the Arab world. In addition to the resources devoted to rebuilding Iraq, the Bush administration has committed approximately \$386 million to supporting democratic reform in the Middle East—more than its immediate predecessors combined. While doing so, the U.S. has been careful to emphasize that Washington is leaving it to Arabs—except in Iraq—to develop their own visions for a democratic future. Far from developing a blueprint to be imposed upon Arab societies, Washington believes that the status quo in the region is so untenable that, as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told the *Washington Post* in 2005, the Bush administration is “willing to move in another direction,” implying that the United States would accept Islamist rule.

Yet Washington's support for change in the Arab world, so long as it is the result of actual or quasi-democratic practices, has left the Bush administration in a rhetorical and analytical trap. The refusal to recognize the Hamas-controlled Palestinian Authority government that came to

power in March 2006—as the result of free and fair elections that represent the will of the Palestinian people—in particular has led Arabs to conclude that the United States is not sincere in its call for democratic change. Throughout the spring of 2006, the Arab press and opinion leaders subjected the Bush administration to withering criticism and accusations of pernicious double standards when it comes to democracy in the Arab world.

While it is true that Hamas prevailed in an election that a host of international non-governmental organization certified as among the fairest in the Arab world, this is not a sufficiently compelling reason for the United States to recognize the government of Ismail Haniyya. Hamas is a terrorist organization that specifically employs violence against civilians and does not adhere to democratic values. This very predicament—that the United States recognized the legitimacy of the Palestinian elections but not the organization elected—suggests the need for a set of principles that has been noticeably lacking in U.S. democracy promotion policy.

Specifically, as forcefully as the Bush administration has called for freedom and democracy in the Arab world, Washington must be equally forceful in upholding two basic standards: non-violence and adherence to democratic principles that go beyond mere democratic procedures. Such principles include rule of law, rights of women and minorities, religious and political tolerance, transparency, and alternation of power. Based on the statements of Hamas leaders, as well as the group's political agenda and founding charter, the organization cannot be called democratic according to most of these criteria.

Had the Bush administration articulated this set of principles and standards from the beginning it would have met with fierce criticism, but Washington at least would not have been vulnerable to charges of deceit. To be sure, political transformation in the Arab world will develop in particular ways that conform to Egyptian, Palestinian, Jordanian, Bahraini, and Algerian societies. While organizations such as Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Hizbollah may have grassroots support and authentic visions of political change, the United States is not required to support them. There are other political activists and organizations in the Arab world that may not have the reservoir of support that the Brotherhood, Hamas, or Hizbollah currently command, but are certainly more democratic than these Islamist groups.

There are few reliable metrics by which the progress of democratic development can be judged. Yet by clearly outlining the basic principles that democratic political organizations and activists must uphold, Washington can insulate itself from charges of hypocrisy, identify groups that are truly democratic, and make its case for democratic change in the Arab world more effectively.

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