

# A checklist for promoting freedom, democracy

THE UNITED STATES HAS RECENTLY appointed two able officials — Karen Wright and Liz Cheney — to revamp two of its persistently enigmatic and largely failed policies: global public diplomacy and promoting democracy throughout the wider Middle East region.

Having spent the last 35 years of my professional life deeply engaged in both those arenas, I venture here to offer some thoughts that folks in Washington might ponder if they aim to do a better job than their predecessors of grasping why this noble American mission to promote freedom and democracy is received with such scepticism, scorn and even resistance around the world, and not just in Arab-Islamic lands.

Here's a quick list of issues the US should ponder:

1. Style. As that great British thinker Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones once said: "It's the singer, not the song". The noble policy to promote freedom/democracy is often resisted because Washington's manner tends to be aggressive and threatening. It uses sanctions, the military and unilateral laying down of the law that others must follow, or else be considered enemies and thus liable to regime change. People don't like to be bullied and threatened, even to change for their own good.

2. Credibility. The US simply does not have much credibility in the Arab-Islamic Middle East in terms of consistency or fairness. Instead, its long policy track record has hurt, angered or offended most people in this region, primarily by backing dictators and autocrats or supporting the Israeli position on key issues of Arab-Israeli peace making.

The priority freedom issue for most Arabs is freedom from foreign occupation and subjugation, whether it's the Palestinians, Iraq or other situations. If Washington uses war and active pressure diplomacy to implement UN resolutions in Lebanon and Iraq, but does nothing parallel to implement UN resolutions calling for the freedom of Palestinians from Israeli

## A VIEW FROM THE ARAB WORLD



RAMI G KHOURI

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occupation, it will continue to be greeted with disdainful guffaws in most of the Middle East.

3. Consistency. The United States could promote freedom and democracy without waging war in Iraq, spending \$300 billion, leaving over 1,500 Americans killed and more than 10,000 injured, and perhaps 100,000 Iraqis killed, and creating a massive anti-American backlash throughout the world. It can better promote democracy and rally Arab democrats by supporting term limits for Arab

presidents and promoting democracy.

4. Motive. A perpetually rolling motive for the American war in Iraq is not good for American credibility. We've been told Iraq was about weapons of mass destruction, links with Al Qaeda, imminent threats to the United States, home-grown brutality against the Iraqi people, stopping threats to neighbours and, now, spreading freedom and democracy throughout the Middle East. Some of these rationales may one day prove to be correct. In the meantime, the collection of half a dozen is crippling the trust in America.

5. Context. The Arab world's very vulnerable states suffer massive internal pressures due to issues of population, identity, demography, economy, environment, ideology, crises of citizenship rights vs statehood obligations and secularism vs religiosity, and the perpetual pressures of foreign armies. In this wider context, the issue of promoting freedom and democracy is dwarfed by the more pressing imperatives of stable statehood, liberation from foreign occupation, meeting basic human needs, and stopping the tradition of foreign armies coming at us every couple of generations and redrawing our map and reconfiguring our systems.

Freedom and democracy certainly would help resolve many of our indigenous problems if they were applied across the board. If the US and others abroad promote these values selectively and expediently, as is the case now, they will continue to elicit resistance and rebuke.

6. Legitimacy. There is no global consensus that the United States is mandated to promote freedom and democracy, or that this is America's divinely mandated destiny. There is such a mandate, though, in the charter of the United Nations, Security Council resolutions to end foreign occupations, and international legal conventions — most of which the US resists, ignores, or applies very selectively. No surprise then that virtually the whole world resists the United States.

7. Militarism. The American use of

pre-emptive war for regime change, already applied in Afghanistan and Iraq, creates more problems than it resolves. It shatters the concept of peace and security through international law, and asserts the triumph of the law of the jungle, where the strongest rules. Promoting freedom and democracy through the guns of the US Marines is not credible with many people outside of Republican and neo-conservative Washington circles.

8. Relevance. The value of individual freedom as defined in American culture runs against the grain of the concept of freedom as it is understood in most of the Middle East and the developing world, where people sacrifice certain individual liberties for the protection, the identity, the sense of hope, the well-being, and the communal expression that comes from belonging to a bigger group. Such groups include family, tribe, religion, or ethnic or national group (for Kurds, Druze, Armenians, Circassians, and others), along with the Islamic Umma or the Arab "nation". These collective identities dominate the issue of personal freedom, at least at this stage of development in the region.

These are real concerns, derived from modern historical experience, not from imagined threats or Arab psycho-social deviancies. They are very relevant in the context of Washington's desire to promote freedom and democracy, because they act as the primary constraint to any meaningful Arab cooperation with the US. More important, though, is that they can all be overcome and removed from the scene, through better communication between Arabs and Americans and more consistent, lawful policies by all concerned. Just some food for thought from the Middle Eastern battlefield of ideas and perceptions that is littered with both the corpses of failed American initiatives and the burdens of distressed Arab societies.

Rami G Khouri is executive editor of The Daily Star