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American Overreach: Strategic Interests and Millennial Ambitions in the Middle East

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This article argues that American actions in the Middle East designed to advance democracy and/or 'moderation' tend to yield perverse outcomes that frustrate the aspirations of local actors while undermining the values purportedly being promoted by the US. In order to explain these contradictions, we emphasise the linkage between policies of democracy promotion and long-standing American commitments both to millennialism and geographical omnipresence. As a result of these policies and geopolitical vision, we argue that 'democracy promotion' often devolves into a simple defence of American interest – by producing electoral outcomes intended to strengthen local agents seen as compliant with US regional priorities. In this context, the shift from democracy promotion to a policy of pursuing 'moderation' in the region, understood as support for American policies, is entirely coherent. Commentators tend to present this shift (particularly in the wake of the Iraq War) as recognition by US political actors of the imperial overtones embedded in more heavy-handed approaches to regime change. Yet, the call for moderation is itself profoundly intertwined with American millennial aspirations, while remaining remarkably devoid of clear content and thus equally amenable to manipulation for strategic ends. By way of conclusion, we suggest an alternative basis for a less intrusive American position in the region, one that rejects the need for an overstretched territorial presence and that is grounded in a substantive respect for local self-determination.

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INTRODUCTION

At the heart of American foreign policy in the Middle East is a persistent contradiction. On the surface, the US enjoys greater military and economic dominance over the region than perhaps ever before. Even prior to the occupations of both Iraq and Afghanistan, the US stationed nearly 30,000 troops across the Middle East, including at least one hundred active-duty personnel in Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates.[1] This extensive military footprint has brought with it clear economic effects, in particular providing the country with an unprecedented degree of direct access to oil resources inside Iraq and elsewhere. To further underscore American primacy, the US's sole regional competitor is Iran, a relatively weak local player whose economic and military capacities hardly compare to previous imperial or Cold War rivals.

Still, despite this position of unquestioned dominance, the US is nonetheless deeply limited in its ability to project strategic power in the long term. Actual American policies have been a continual source of disorder throughout the Middle East. Along with pursuing or promoting four separate regional wars (two interventions in Iraq, one in Afghanistan, and the July War between Lebanon and Israel), American actions have played critical roles in sustaining tensions in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and in producing wild fluctuations in the oil markets. On the one hand, such instability has clearly entrenched a permanent logic of American intervention, which aids the US's ability to impose its preferences on the region. Yet, on the other hand, as disorder has increased, the US in recent years has found itself over-stretched, with regional commitments that exceed both its military and economic capacities to project power. Not only does this fact raise doubts about the continued viability of US policies, it also threatens the maintenance of American regional authority.

Such long-term strategic weakness is underscored by American reliance on allies and proxies who face extensive local opposition. The primary source of this opposition derives from the authoritarianism of many of the regimes most directly aligned with the United States. Since the end of the Cold War, association with American policies in the region has only exacerbated such underlying domestic illegitimacy. Further, US foreign policy has become a focus of local resentments, with popular calls for reform explicitly opposing continued American influence. With political channels foreclosed to opponents of the region's autocrats, resort to extra-political violence has occurred with increasing frequency within the Middle East and beyond. Unable to establish a coherent and stable regional consensus, the US finds itself stoking anti-American sentiment and undermining the credibility of its own allies. For students of American foreign policy this fact may be particularly ironic at a moment when the US has made democracy-promotion a centrepiece of its policies.

In this context of short-term dominance and long-term strategic weakness, the puzzle remains of why the US is pursuing its goals in ways that undermine its interest in regional stability. This article argues that America's current role can be best explained by exploring the long-standing millennial justifications for US foreign policy. As we discuss in the following pages, such millennial arguments assert that protecting American freedom at home requires the complete pacification of external violence abroad as well as the continual global extension of the US's territorial presence. In the American experience, these anxieties have deep roots, extending back to the earliest period of Anglo colonisation, and at present depict the US as confronting a world of inchoate threats.[2] In interrogating the current iteration of American millennialism in the Middle East, this article analyses how US policies centred on the discourses of democracy and moderation – although employed to contain violence and impose regional order – produce internal contradictions that are ultimately self-defeating.

US FOREIGN POLICY AND THE QUEST FOR PERMANENT PEACE

The problem of the United States' strategic weakness in the Middle East has not gone unnoticed by policy makers and students of the region.[3] If anything, it has generated a number of potential explanations. One approach focuses on how domestic constraints on American foreign policy produce bureaucratic incoherence and sub-optimal outcomes. John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt offer perhaps the most well-known and controversial version of this argument, emphasising the power of pro-Israel groups to shape Middle East policy and discourse.[4] Other versions emphasise competition between elements of the foreign policy bureaucracy, such as infighting between the State and Defense Departments.[5] Following the election of Democratic candidate Barack Obama as president, an increasingly common explanation has been to present current difficulties in the region as the legacy of the Bush administration, with the last eight years viewed as an aberration rather than the product of deeper institutional or ideational problems.

Yet, America's position in the Middle East – of paradoxical strength and weakness – cannot be explained by the rise of 'neo-conservatism' or bureaucratic incoherence alone. While relevant to specific policy outcomes, such arguments fail to appreciate the remarkable historical continuities between Democratic and Republican administrations, continuities that tie Obama's presidency to its predecessor. In essence, they ignore the structural context within which policy debates take place. Such explanations also ignore how the permanent logic of American intervention pre-dates the rise of either a strong pro-Israel lobby or today's particular modes of bureaucratic fragmentation and competition. In fact, this permanent logic

is in large part due to long-term developments in American political identity. Drawing on approaches in critical geopolitics[6] helps explain how an American commitment to spatial omnipresence – particularly through a continually growing network of military outposts – has become central to national self-understanding and to presumptions about its global purpose.

The US not only maintains a decisive defence commitment in the Middle East, it is physically present throughout the world to a degree that is historically unparalleled. As of 2009, some 516,273 military service members – not including Department of Defense civilian officials – were deployed abroad, stationed across 716 reported overseas bases and present in approximately 150 foreign states (nearly 80 percent of the world's countries).[7] This worldwide military network is sustained by tremendous expenditures, which account for almost half of global defence spending – a number equal to the following twenty nations combined.[8] Yet, as John Agnew notes, the US is hardly a traditional empire, one that would seek direct colonies or permanent political sovereignty.[9] Instead, such omnipresence promotes an American project of hegemony, in which the US enrolls "others in the exercise of [its own] power by convincing, cajoling, and coercing"[10] external players to take part in extending US economic and military influence.

Similar to previous hegemons (or imperial states such as France and Britain), the projection of American power is defended not only in terms of strategic interest, but also through an intricate set of ideological justifications. These justifications present US omnipresence as a force of global well-being and moral authority. The key ideological grounding for such geographic reach and assertiveness lies in the idea of the US as a chosen community, enjoying an historically redemptive mission.[11] The earliest Puritan settlers saw themselves as sent by God on 'an errand into the wilderness,' to serve as a model of Christian piety and to help precipitate the coming of heaven on earth. John Winthrop famously declared, "We shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us."[12] At the heart of this idea of a 'city upon a hill' was a commitment to millennialism – the belief that God would one day rule on earth and create a permanent condition of peace. While dramatically altered from colonial and nineteenth-century iterations, today millennialism continues to play a surprisingly central role in American political identity, although largely secularised and stripped of its overt Protestant implications. In particular, the commitment to permanent peace sits at the heart of America's force projection in the world.

Since the US's emergence as a global power at the beginning of the twentieth century, the goal of pacification has been connected to the persistent idea that Americans would only be safe at home if the world could be reconstructed as a community of stable democracies. In the wake of World War II, no text better expressed this linkage between peace and democracy promotion than National Security Document number sixty-eight. Generally considered the foundational text of Cold War foreign policy, NSC-68, written

in 1950, did not simply emphasise the specific security dilemmas posed by the Soviet Union. It also reaffirmed the vision of the US as enjoying a unique historical project, one that aimed to protect national freedom by eliminating all potential sites of foreign chaos:

> In a shrinking world, which now faces the threat of atomic warfare, it is not an adequate objective merely to seek to check the Kremlin design, for the absence of order among nations is becoming less and less tolerable. This fact imposes on us, in our own interests, the responsibility of world leadership. It demands that we make the attempt, and accept the risks inherent in it, to bring about order and justice by means consistent with the principles of freedom and democracy.[13]

In essence, NSC-68 presented the implications of the American missionary project for the Cold War, and asserted that overcoming the threat posed by international disorder required both US global supremacy and the reconstitution of foreign regimes in the name of democracy.

It also underscored the US's commitment to its own geographical omnipresence. In essence, wherever threats loomed, no matter how distant from America's actual territorial boundaries, the US had a responsibility to transform disorder into democratic peace. Since World War II, the unabated growth of the US's spatial and military footprint illustrates the continued centrality of these themes. Even more importantly, it also demonstrates how millennial identity and territorial unboundedness have become mutually reinforcing. Precisely because of the need to overcome international disorder no matter where it exists, the US has extended its geographic reach. Yet, in doing so, America also finds itself subject to local insurrections and new potential dangers, which in turn justify even greater territorial presence.

At present, national identity and ideas of domestic security are profoundly connected to an American vision of itself as the world's primary international force for stability and democratic transformation.[14] Over the last hundred years, these millennial ambitions have been most associated with the Democratic Party, as exemplified by Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, as well as the human rights rhetoric of policies pursued by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Jimmy Carter, and Bill Clinton. By contrast, Republicans, at least going back to the Party's opposition to Wilson's League of Nations, have long been associated both with greater tendencies toward isolationism as well as realpolitik international perspectives. But more recently, central figures in the Republican foreign policy establishment have embraced a Wilsonian brand of millennialism styled as neo-conservative.[15] With this turn, both the right and left are increasingly articulating claims about US strategic objectives in the language of moral right and which take as given the need for territorial reach.

Such claims are evident in both George Bush's 2003 State of the Union Address and Barack Obama's March 2009 policy speech on his new strategy

for Afghanistan and Pakistan. In laying the foundation for an impending invasion of Iraq, and in highlighting the US's historic role as the paramount global force for order and tranquility, Bush asserted,

> Once again, this nation and all our friends are all that stand between a world at peace, and a world of chaos and constant alarm. Once again, we are called to defend the safety of our people and the hopes of all mankind. And we accept this responsibility. . . . The liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world, it is God's gift to humanity.[16]

The address captured all of the key elements of the American sense of moral purpose, underscoring the degree to which US omnipresence not only protected domestic security but also made possible the international hope of democratic peace.

While employing less florid language, Obama has more recently reiterated both the US project of pacification and its tie to the nation's historically redemptive mission. To date, Obama's primary regional effort has been in re-directing American military and diplomatic focus back to the conflict in Afghanistan. Speaking of the urgency of America's mission, President Obama stressed that to fail to stabilise the area would lead to the return of the extremist, "core Taliban leadership" and would "cast Afghanistan under the shadow of perpetual violence."[17] Obama's speech – with its emphasis on the starkly contrasted alternatives of peace and security on the one hand, and chaos and violence on the other – are reminiscent not only of President Bush's language of moral obligation, but echo the tradition of American millennialism from which both presidents draw inspiration:

> We are in Afghanistan to confront a common enemy that threatens the United States, our friends and allies, and the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan. . . . That is a cause that could not be more just. . . . The world cannot afford the price that will come due if Afghanistan slides back into chaos. . . . We have a shared responsibility to act – not because we seek to project power for its own sake, but because our own peace and security depends upon it. And what's at stake now is not just our own security – it is the very idea that free nations can come together on behalf of our common security. . . . Because the United States of America stands for peace and security, justice and opportunity. That is who we are, and that is what history calls on us to do once more.[18]

While eliminating the overtly religious tone of President Bush's rhetorical flourishes, Obama too starkly presents a conception of America's role in Afghanistan and Pakistan as redemptive, the only means for securing a peaceful future for "free nations" and staving off the chaos of extremism. For Obama, as for Bush, wherever these threats emerge, the US has an historical duty to transform disorder into democratic calm.

To the extent that there has been a break between administrations, a central disagreement concerns whether these ends should be pursued unilaterally or multilaterally through coalition-building and international institutions. Anne-Marie Slaughter, the current Director of Policy Planning at the Department of State, argues that the problem with the Bush administration was that its unilateralism – especially with regard to Iraq – gave Wilsonianism a black eye: "Iraq has given armed intervention in a country's internal affairs a very bad name . . . . However, the right lesson to draw is . . . . to turn back to Wilson's original ideas and recognize the extent to which updated versions of them have become woven through the warp and woof of the international system."[19] In other words, the US should maintain its commitments to global assertiveness and permanent peace, but in the context of greater international support. Reaffirming the millennial project of democratic tranquility, she concludes, "We must find ways to work together to achieve Wilson's vision: a world made safe for democracy, prosperity, knowledge, beauty and human flourishing."[20]

In essence, this new Obama administration approach does not repudiate the logic of permanent intervention, since multilateralism is ultimately only a strategic tool for promoting given ends. Even if policies aimed at securing pacification and democratisation are pursued through greater international agreement, they still underscore bipartisan commitment to fundamentally millennial goals. This underlying continuity has two clear dimensions. First, regardless of the change in Administration the basic ideological focus on pacification has remained constant. Even in Obama's speech on receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, he used the occasion as an opportunity to reinforce the inevitability of extremist threat and the necessity of American power for global security, stating:

> For make no mistake: evil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms . . . . [T]he plain fact is this: the United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms . . . We have borne this burden not because we seek to impose our will. We have done so out of enlightened self-interest.[21]

At the same time, this ideological focus has clear structural corollaries, embodied by the economic and military infrastructure necessary for the maintenance and projection of American authority. While both dimensions, ideological and structural, operate in tandem, the infrastructural investment required to project current force levels indefinitely into the future generates its own related objectives and self-perpetuating logic. Although differences clearly exist among policy actors and Administrations, a primary focus on these differences masks profound consensus on matters of basic

political identity and institutional interests. Thus, while U.S. foreign policy with respect to the Middle East has a variety of intellectual roots and contemporary forms, nowhere is this underlying consensus more evident.

Since September 11, the central American emphasis vis-á-vis the region has been on transforming Arab and Muslim societies politically and ethically. This emphasis – present in both Republican and Democratic foreign policy establishments – reflects in part the view that the source of violence emanating from the Middle East is rooted within these societies. Such a diagnosis identifies the lack of democracy, poor economic performance, and local political and religious culture as requiring basic reform. Since Arab states are considered incapable of developing this reform internally, only external influence is viewed to be a viable remedy for local pathologies. By discounting the degree to which external interference has itself been a critical cause of regional problems, this perspective ignores American involvement in perpetuating the region's underlying instability. As a result, U.S. efforts at regional transformation have fallen into the same trap that has long plagued American millennial ambitions. As with past interventionist projects, policymakers imagine that they can combine moral objectives with goals of American dominance. However, in attempting to do so, the former are repeatedly subordinated, with principles of democracy and liberalism reduced to short-term security imperatives of U.S. power.

In fact, across both Bush and Obama administrations, this persistent commitment to pacifying global threats has deeply undermined the substantive meaning of democracy promotion. Rather than an embrace of self-determination which respects local demands, democracy promotion has become fixated on providing legitimacy to compliant elites. Moreover, when elections fail to produce the desired outcome, US policy makers generally claim that local groups are ideologically ill-prepared for democratic processes and seek to undercut these governments. The eventual result has been a corroding effect on both the credibility and legitimacy of American behaviour in the region. Liberal and conservative brands of Wilsonianism have generated a cycle of disillusionment with American influence, as local actors first embrace the moral justifications of US foreign policy and then grow frustrated and resentful as the US fails to act in ways consistent with these justifications.

FROM DEMOCRACY PROMOTION TO DEMOCRACY DEMOTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The previous section provided a historical and theoretical account of American Wilsonianism. This section explores the interventionist consequences for the Middle East of such a geopolitical vision. We provide an empirically grounded assessment of the often paradoxical impact of

America's professed interest in regional democratisation. We do so by comparing two key examples of American democracy promotion from 2005 to the present: US activities in the Palestinian Authority and in Lebanon. As illustrated below, elections in each setting have been among the most dynamic and open in the region. Yet, for the US, these elections have come to be judged by their ability to keep American allies in power and have been subject to destabilising forms of interference.

The year 2005 brought a wave of elections across the region, impacted by developments in American policy in Iraq as well as by the grand strategy for democratisation announced by President Bush in his second inaugural address. To appreciate the connection envisaged by American policy makers between national security and millennial commitments to expanding freedom, it is worthwhile to revisit Bush's sweeping remarks:

> For as long as whole regions of the world simmer in resentment and tyranny – prone to ideologies that feed hatred and excuse murder – violence will gather, and multiply in destructive power, and cross the most defended borders, and raise a mortal threat. . . . The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world. *America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one*. . . . So it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, *with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world*. . . . The leaders of governments with long habits of control need to know: To serve your people you must learn to trust them.[22]

According to Bush, democracy promotion was essential to eliminating sites of international disorder and thus to ensuring that chaos would not threaten American security or the global pursuit of peace. Moreover, the president's 2005 speech, a clarion call for democratisation, was aimed squarely at regimes in the Middle East. His address to "leaders of governments with long habits of control" seemed tailored to American allies in the Arab world and was interpreted as such. Following his speech, as previously scheduled elections across the Arab world took place, beginning with the Iraqi elections, a direct connection was drawn between the new American emphasis on democracy promotion and developments in the Middle East. Fouad Ajami, a political analyst of the Middle East and advisor to the Bush administration declared, "We have George W. Bush to thank for the Arab democratic spring,"[23] while an article in *Newsweek* applauded Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, for "rush[ing] onto the world stage with force and style, and with the fair wind of the Arab Democratic Spring at her back."[24]

One of the places that saw the greatest pressure to hold elections under the rubric of democratisation was the West Bank and Gaza. Despite the irony of the American demand that Palestinians demonstrate an ability to sustain

a viable democracy *before* being accorded a state, Palestinians exceeded expectations in January 2006. Palestinian civil society once again proved to be the liveliest and most politically active in the Arab world, convening elections that were exemplary in the region. In free, fair, and internationally monitored elections, Hamas captured a majority of the Palestinian Legislative Council. However, as we explore, with the defeat of its local proxies, American support for elections came to an abrupt end for all but rhetorical purposes – not only in Palestine but in the entire region.

Tellingly, Hamas's electoral performance represented the first instance of peaceful alternation of power in the Arab world.[25] Moreover, it was the product of a strategy by the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority (PA) to bring Hamas into the political system to bolster the credibility of the PA. This strategy of incorporating Hamas was also intended to make the group an institutional stakeholder and thus less likely to act as a spoiler for Fatah's initiatives. Despite its staunch opposition to Hamas, the United States, too, bought into this logic in advance of the elections. According to at least one account, the US was particularly taken by the idea that a Fatah victory in an election with Hamas participation would weaken political Islam in Palestine and the region as a whole.[26]

Neither Fatah nor Hamas expected the group to win a majority in the elections. As such, both the conduct of the elections in Palestine and their unexpected result should have been seen as an important milestone in democratisation efforts in the region, rather than their epitaph. To the extent that the international emphasis on local elections was intended to address the PA's record of cronyism and poor governance, Hamas's platform, with its domestic focus on competence, credibility, and anti-corruption was consistent with the goals of election advocates. Unlike Fatah, Hamas also proved to have both the organisational skills to conduct a successful campaign[27] and the support of a "broad-based social movement connected to multiple institutions in the West Bank and Gaza."[28] Moreover, analysts across the board noted that Hamas's victory was not a referendum on relations with Israel but on the corruption of domestic incumbents. Unfortunately, precisely because of this context, the international community, and specifically the US, interfered throughout the process to prejudice the election. The International Crisis Group (ICG) documented instances of intervention to alter the timing of the elections and to shift resources in ways designed to strengthen the US's preferred party, Fatah.[29] Despite these efforts, or perhaps partly as a result of Palestinian perceptions of Fatah as an American proxy, Hamas prevailed.

Following the election, the US convinced the Quartet to initiate an international financial blockade of the Palestinian Authority.[30] The blockade advanced the political goal of impoverishing Palestinians into reversing their democratic choice. In an effort to stem the Palestinian crisis by breaking the strategic impasse between Fatah and Hamas, the Saudis convened

the Fatah-affiliated Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, and Hamas leaders to conclude a deal for a national unity government. The result – the Mecca Agreement – was a fragile entente designed to create a Fatah-Hamas power-sharing arrangement. This arrangement would end factional fighting and present a more acceptable Palestinian leadership to the international community.

The deal came into effect in February 2007, but was short-lived due in no small measure to American opposition. The US engaged in a sustained effort to realign Abbas' incentives, requiring the Fatah faction to choose either power-sharing with Hamas or assistance from the international community. During the limited tenure of the national unity government, the Americans engaged selectively with non-Hamas members of the government through back channels while maintaining the economic embargo. More damagingly, the US provided direct security assistance and funding to Fatah contingents and security forces, such as the Presidential Guard, in a clear bid to strengthen one political faction in Palestine at the expense of the other. In the words of the ICG analysis, "Through their words and deeds, [American policy makers] helped persuade important Fatah elements that the unity government was a transient phenomenon and that their former control of the Palestinian Authority could be restored."[31] Little consideration was given by either the US or their Fatah counterparts to the fact that such a restoration of power would be in direct conflict with the results of internationally monitored elections – ones they themselves convened just a year before.

By June 2007, the Mecca Agreement gave way to renewed clashes that degenerated into a struggle for control of the Gaza Strip. Although the events that eventually led to Hamas' gaining sole control of Gaza have been characterised in the Western press as a violent coup on the part of Hamas, the facts tell a more complicated story. While it is true that the Hamas militia seized control of government institutions in the Gaza Strip by force, in light of their overwhelming electoral victory the characterisation of Hamas' control in Gaza as a 'coup' begs the question: against whom? Hamas had already secured a clear parliamentary majority through elections, which gave it a mandate to govern without resorting to violence. The problem, as told by Hamas supporters, was the unwillingness of Fatah and its foreign allies to respect the outcome of the elections and permit Hamas to exercise this mandate. More to the point, Hamas argued that Fatah, particularly through the militias affiliated with Mohammed Dahlan in Gaza, threatened a violent overthrow.[32]

The aftermath of four days of all-out war between militias in the streets of Gaza left Hamas in complete control there, but enabled Fatah to consolidate its power in the West Bank. The key features of this consolidation were the dissolution by President Mahmoud Abbas of the parliament elected in 2006 and its replacement by an appointed government without electoral approval. As ICG observed, Abbas became increasingly authoritarian,

governing by "presidential decrees appropriating legislative powers or trans-ferring them to the PLO, [in violation of] Palestinian law."[33] Further, the newly installed government amended electoral rules to effectively exclude Hamas candidates from the next legislative elections, facilitating the return to one-party rule in the Palestinian territories.[34] The international response to these events, led by the US, has been to reward the Fatah government in the West Bank. On the one hand, the international community has eased the financial embargo in the West Bank and recognised President Abbas as the sole legit-imate representative of the Palestinians in the reinitiated 'peace process.' On the other hand, the total embargo on Gaza has been maintained and even intensified. By the end of 2008, the situation in the Gaza Strip amounted to an artificial, man-made humanitarian crisis of staggering proportions. The fruit of Palestinians' democratic choice has been the impoverishment of the population still governed by the electoral victor.[35]

Even in the wake of a devastating war in Gaza, which only worsened the humanitarian consequences of the embargo, the Obama administration has pursued the same basic approach of selectively funding proxies regard-less of electoral legitimacy. In March 2009, Hillary Clinton's first major action as Secretary of State regarding Palestinian politics was to offer $1 billion in aid to Fatah, a move widely seen as an effort to maintain Bush-era policies, with the ultimate purpose of undermining the strength and gov-erning capacity of Hamas in Gaza.[36] The US also continues to invest heavily in arming Fatah through the Palestinian Authority's security organs. In 2007, the Bush administration sent Lieutenant General Keith Dayton to train and equip Fatah against its internal adversary, a fact Dayton himself acknowl-edged as his primary role.[37] Not only has the new White House team kept Dayton in the West Bank, his position has become so entrenched that it is common in the territories to refer to the Fatah-controlled PA security forces as the 'Dayton forces' and to the PA itself as the 'Dayton government.' Just as troublingly, the Obama administration appears in no hurry to call for new elections, despite the fact that Abbas's presidential term expired in January 2009 and the current West Bank Prime Minister, Salam Fayyad, has no electoral mandate and was simply appointed by Abbas in 2007.[38]

Rather than a Bush-era aberration, the Obama administration persists in reinforcing this classic stance of effusive democratic rhetoric combined with support on the ground, often through coercion, for compliant elites. Alongside practices in the PA, another clear example has been the pursuit of virtually identical policies in Lebanon, with American influence employed to pit internal factions against each other despite the country's long history of civil war and sectarian conflict. In his 2009 Middle East policy speech in Cairo, Obama went out of his way to repudiate the notion that the US had any interest in intervening in local elections and thus paid respect to the importance of local control for authentic democratisation. Obama declared, "America does not presume to know what is best for everyone, just as we

would not presume to pick the outcome of a peaceful election. . . . Those are not just American ideas, they are human rights, and that is why we will support them everywhere."[39] Yet, less than two weeks before Obama's Cairo speech, Vice President Joseph Biden made a dramatic appearance in Lebanon on the eve of the country's parliamentary elections. With the exception of a brief meeting with Nabih Berri, the Speaker of the House nominally allied with the opposition March 8th camp, he met in private and exclusively with figures associated with Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and the Sunni "Future" movement. In fact, his clear and public preference for one of the two competing coalitions in the impending Lebanese elections demonstrated the substantial continuity between the Obama and Bush administration approaches to internal Lebanese politics.

After the ill-fated Israeli attempt during the July 2006 war to eliminate or substantially weaken Hezbollah as a political actor on the Lebanese scene, the Bush administration began an aggressive policy of bolstering Hezbollah's domestic opponents. While ostensibly offering aid to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Internal Security Forces (ISF) to strengthen Lebanese state institutions, the Bush administration made clear that this meant building the capacity of particular Lebanese factions to counter-balance Hezbollah.[40] Indeed, the US ambassador to Lebanon, Michele Sison – originally appointed by President Bush but still in her position under the Obama administration – testified that "Lebanon is at the forefront of US efforts to promote democracy . . . and combat extremism in the Middle East," and that the US is therefore training and equipping the LAF and ISF "to support their deployment throughout Lebanon to provide security" against "Hizballah and other illegal armed groups [that] continue to threaten the peace and security of the Lebanese people."[41] After President Obama took office, Ambassador Sison continued to underscore that American support to the LAF and ISF was intended primarily for internal security and counter-terrorism purposes, and that all military assistance was provided on the condition that arms be used in way consistent with "U.S. national security imperatives."[42] In the words of the BBC: "The US has given the Lebanese army more than $410 million . . . in order to provide a counterweight to Hezbollah's powerful military wing, the Islamic Resistance."[43]

In keeping with the US policy of bolstering Lebanese *internal* security forces to contain Hezbollah, the government of Prime Minister Siniora was encouraged by the Bush administration to adopt a hard line in 2008 negotiations with the opposition bloc, denying them the share of cabinet seats to which they were entitled based on their electoral performance. The negotiations, which were designed to break an 18-month political impasse that had paralysed Lebanon's parliament, broke down and led to fighting between militias in the streets of West Beirut in May 2008.[44] While the US-trained and supported LAF and ISF stayed out of the street battles, the fighting did see the emergence of a new militia, affiliated with the US-supported

Hariri camp's Future movement. The new Sunni militia was defeated by Hezbollah forces, which then voluntarily turned captured portions of West Beirut over to the control of the LAF. The creation, arming, and financing of private security forces to develop a Future movement militia was the logical consequence of the Bush administration's 'counter-balancing' strategy for Lebanon.[45] Only when the armed strategy failed were the Siniora government and the Hariri camp left with no choice but to return to negotiations – despite Bush administration objections – and to accept a national unity accord with the opposition, including Hezbollah. Less than a year after the formation of this national unity government, as new Lebanese elections approached, the Obama administration picked up where the Bush administration had left off, once again inserting its preferences into the Lebanese political arena.

During his high-profile visit, Vice President Biden took the stage in Beirut and declared that while "the shape and composition of Lebanon's government is for the Lebanese people to decide,. . . I urge those who would think about standing with the spoilers of peace not to miss this opportunity to walk away from the spoilers."[46] To make the threat even less veiled, Biden asserted that "I know, for the United States at least, we will evaluate the shape of our assistance programs based on the composition of the new government and the policies it advocates."[47] American analysts like Robert Satloff, director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP) – a think tank tied to Bush-era Middle East policy – credit the Biden visit with swinging the election, by highlighting the economic, military, and diplomatic risks of voting the wrong way.[48] As with the US backing of PA security forces in the West Bank, the US is funnelling support to one party in an internally divided political system at the expense of the other. It is, of course, unsurprising that financial and military assistance designed to tip the local balance in favour of one side would be imperilled in the event of an unfavourable election result. At the heart of US democracy promotion – whether under the Bush administration or its successor – remains the basic tension between the call for democratic process and the demand for reliable electoral outcomes that return American allies to power.

As the foregoing pages have shown, regional actors who heeded the American call for democratisation have found that democracy takes second seat to American short-term objectives if the two are in apparent conflict. When opponents of American influence in the region gain electoral favour, democracy promotion slides effortlessly into democracy demotion. Equally disconcerting, the language of American moralism is sufficiently flexible to justify any outcome so long as it is consistent with stabilising the US's perceived interests. Such language is fundamentally disconnected from the tangible experience of local political communities. As a consequence, coercive threat-making in Lebanon can stand side by side with powerful denunciations of electoral interference. In this way, resurgent Wilsonianism

uncritically strips events of their local significance, distorting those mean-
ings and replacing them with a singular focus on US projects. Crucially,
these developments are independent of the sincerity of the American desire
to advance democracy. So long as democratisation remains bound to the
pursuit of pacification and the advancement of stated regional interests, the
basic dynamic will persist. In the end, however, this tension between the
democratic rhetoric and the anti-democratic impact has proven unsustain-
able, especially as frustrated local reformers have seized the language of
democracy to criticise perceived US double standards.[49] As the next sec-
tion details, the US's response has been to undertake a wider reevaluation
of American priorities in the region. Under the rubric of supporting 'mod-
eration,' policy makers have shifted the emphasis from democratisation to
producing regime outcomes that are explicitly compatible with American
judgments of interest.

MODERATION AS THE ANTIDOTE TO AMERICAN MORALISM?

In its approach to electoral results in countries like Palestine and Lebanon,
the US is deeply invested in the victories of allies against their domestic
challengers. The advantages of these elites are understood not merely in the
pragmatic terms of patron-client relations, but also as more likely to ensure
regional stability premised on American hegemony and its continued global
footprint. For the US to manage Israeli-Palestinian conflict, stabilise Iraq and
Afghanistan, redefine Syrian-Lebanese relations, and maintain the balance of
power in the Gulf, policy makers have concluded that the central priority
should be supporting compliant local elites. These elites are depicted as
'moderates' prepared to defend a pro-American status quo against revisionist
'extremists' bent on disorder and the reduction of American influence. The
possibility that free elections might threaten supportive regimes prompted
the US under the Bush administration to downgrade democracy promotion
in favour of constructing an 'axis of moderation,' one seen as better able to
secure a *pax Americana*.

        To date, this emphasis on moderation has been equally embraced by
the Obama administration. The legacy of strategic failure in Iraq, Palestine,
and beyond has led both policy makers and US commentators to turn away
from the earlier Bush administration focus on regime change as a catalyst for
an Arab democratic spring.[50] While such commentators by and large accept
the good intentions of democracy promotion, they share American officials'
concern that simply defending elections actually produces more (not less)
instability and violence.[51] On first glance, this concern with moderation may
appear to be a rejection of millennial aspirations. Yet, as the following dis-
cussion illustrates, the language of moderation has become an increasingly
popular discursive framework for once again conceiving of strategic interests

in terms of a moral commitment to permanent peace. Such language persists in viewing the region as marked by chaos and extremism, and as requiring American intervention in order to produce the putatively more modest goal of creating 'moderate' states.

The American approach to Egypt offers a clear example of the shift from bolstering the democratic credentials of allies to highlighting instead their role as moderating influences. For instance, in 2005, US pressure led the Mubarak regime to jump-start what the regime presented as efforts at political 'liberalisation.' That year Egypt held a deeply flawed procedural exercise in electoral authoritarianism, which yielded the predictable return to power of the ruling National Democratic Party. Two years later, the country adopted constitutional amendments, which the government declared to be extensions of local democracy, enhancing legislative powers and increasing electoral competition. Both the elections and the constitutional changes were heralded by the State Department as part of "a general trend towards political reform" in Egypt.[52] Yet, the Mubarak regimes' constitutional amendments and electoral practices were elsewhere described as "the greatest erosion of human rights in Egypt" in over a quarter century.[53]

In particular, the cumulative effect of the amendments was to consolidate authoritarianism by restraining legitimate political opposition activities and creating new constitutional tools to entrench the emergency powers of the state. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace succinctly assessed the net effect: "The amendments and the process by which they were passed constitute an effort by the Egyptian regime to increase the appearance of greater balance among the branches of government and of greater opportunities for political parties, while in fact limiting real competition strictly and keeping power concentrated in the hands of the executive branch and the ruling party."[54] Given the willingness of the American government to embrace the Mubarak regime's gambit as an example of positive political reform, numerous analysts accused the United States of being complicit in democracy *demotion*.[55] From the perspective of local aspirations for real democratisation, the result in fact had been more damaging than similar policies absent the moral claims from Mubarak and the United States. By enabling the Mubarak regime to pursue decidedly anti-democratic ends under the veneer of liberalisation, the US had helped to undermine the very discourse of reform that local Egyptian democrats had earlier sought to embrace.

Rather than limiting American support for Mubarak, the US ultimately responded to these developments by altering the justification for continued support. While Mubarak may not be a democrat, his regime represents a force of 'moderation' and stands against the tide of violent extremism. Mubarak's centrality to the US's 'axis of moderation' was highlighted by the very choice of Cairo as the site for Obama's June 2009 foreign policy speech to the region. This choice was made despite the fact that numerous Egyptian

human rights groups saw the decision as further entrenching local authoritarianism. In response, groups such as Kefaya, Egypt's leading pro-democracy grassroots organisation, protested by boycotting the speech entirely.[56] When interviewed about Egypt's internal practices, including the detention of thousands of political prisoners, Obama responded by reasserting the moderating role played by the government, stating that Mubarak "has been a stalwart ally in many respects, to the United States. He has sustained peace with Israel . . . . So I think he has been a force for stability. And good in the region."[57]

This general shift away from democracy-talk to defending the moderating influence of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other allies began during the latter stages of the Bush administration. Starting in 2006 and accelerating in 2007, the Bush administration's foreign policy in the Middle East moved from its 'forward strategy of freedom'[58] to a focus on commitments more in line with the political preferences of the pro-American regimes of the region. At heart, this strategy was primarily concerned with redrawing the political map of the region around an alliance scheme designed to contain Iran, America's principal regional adversary. In justifying this strategic realignment, the US, much as Obama did in his June 2009 interview, underscored the stabilising influence of its allies who, while autocratic, remained forces of peace and regional restraint. Essential to these goals was shoring up the shaky domestic legitimacy of governments seen as complicit in US regional policy. American officials hoped that an explicit alliance scheme would enable regional members to see their interests as aligned and to thereby mutually reinforce, rather than undermine, their regimes' stability.

As part of this new alliance strategy, the Bush administration convened a meeting at Annapolis, ostensibly to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but in reality to concretise its new grand strategy. Annapolis reconceived the Palestinian question not as one of either national self-determination or of conflict-resolution but rather as a microcosm for the regional divide between the forces of moderation and extremism. For our purposes, what makes the Annapolis meeting particularly noteworthy is that – as Obama's Cairo visit and comments drive home – it remains the basis for justifying the US's Middle East alliance system and thus defining who counts as a friend or an enemy. The next few pages place Annapolis in the broader context of American moral discourse, which although repackaged around 'moderation' continues to be driven by presumptions of special purpose and with it spatial omnipresence.

At first glance, imagining American allies like Saudi Arabia and Egypt as forces of moderation seems counter-intuitive; they are hardly defenders of the rule of law or liberal toleration. Their inclusion begs the obvious question: what constitutes moderation? Bush and Obama administration actions make clear that the 'axis of moderation' includes the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, plus Jordan, Egypt, and those elements in Palestine

and Lebanon that the United States chooses to recognise. At a greater level of abstraction, the 'moderate' Arab countries or regimes appear to have in common the following three characteristics: (i) they are supportive of American objectives in the Middle East; (ii) they are willing to normalise relations with Israel either unilaterally (Jordan, Egypt) or in the context of a regional peace agreement; and (iii) they wish to curb Iranian influence in the region. What they do not exhibit is a set of substantive commitments to liberal legality or moderation in their domestic political order, independent of American foreign policy priorities.

Sharing little in common other than their desire for regime survival and a generally pro-American and anti-Iranian orientation, the members of the 'axis of moderation' do not frequently behave like participants in a well-ordered alliance system. With the American experiment in Iraq widely decried in the region and the plight of the Palestinians a daily reminder to Arab publics of the price of American favour, the alignment of these regimes with the US exacerbates their domestic legitimacy deficits. To retain their compliance with American grand strategy, the US finds itself having to orchestrate diplomatic efforts to bolster the credibility of its partners and their commitment to the American project.

The November 2007 Annapolis convention was the defining example of an American effort to solidify its preferred axis by providing moderate political leaders with an opportunity to improve the image of their foreign policy at home. Much of the coverage of the convention suggested that its goals were less to do with Israel-Palestine than with alliance building and American preferences in Iraq and Iran.[59] For instance, the *Economist* offered an analysis of Annapolis as bolstering a "coalition of the fearful" designed to create a united Sunni front against mostly Shi'ite "extremists" aligned with Iran.[60] As the article went on to observe, the Arab regimes participating in this coalition had more to fear from opposition at home than from confrontation with Iran, but hoped that the American fixation on Iran would ensure continued external support for their rule. On this telling, reinitiating a 'peace process' was designed in part to distract from the authoritarianism of these regimes by giving them the appearance of standing for something – on behalf of Palestinians – and against something else – the specter of an extremist '*shi'a* crescent.' If this analysis is correct, Annapolis advanced goals that were either unrelated to Israel-Palestine or, even worse, divisive in ways that undermined prospects for peace. Furthermore and paradoxically, these goals suggested an aggressive and confrontational meaning to moderation.

Whether or not concern for Israeli-Palestinian peace was actually paramount, President Bush cast the 'peace process' as part of a broader struggle against extremism. Such an instrumental conception of peace as a mechanism to advance other American goals in the region reprises the themes of this article. The values being promoted in the guise of the new moral imperatives of stability and moderation prove to be either conjoined to

or derivative of American interests, much as were prior attempts at democracy promotion. Bush's remarks at the opening of Annapolis were especially telling:

> Our purpose here in Annapolis is not to conclude an agreement. Rather, it is to launch negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians. . . . the time is right because a battle is underway for the future of the Middle East – and we must not cede victory to the extremists. With their violent actions and contempt for human life, the extremists are seeking to impose a dark vision. . . . If this vision prevails, the future of the region will be endless terror, endless war, and endless suffering. Standing against this dark vision are President Abbas and his government. They are offering the Palestinian people an alternative vision of the future – a vision of peace, a homeland of their own, and a better life. If responsible Palestinian leaders can deliver on this vision, they will deal the forces of extremism a devastating blow. And when liberty takes root in the rocky soil of the West Bank and Gaza, it will inspire millions across the Middle East who want their societies built on freedom and peace and hope.[61]

Once more, Bush draws together all of the elements of millennialism, appropriating moral language to serve the strategic promotion of American interests. Those leaders are "responsible" who share objectives with the United States, and so are presumed to be forces of moderation, democracy, and peace. In advancing a polarising vision of the Middle East, in which opponents are depicted as irreconcilably opposed to the values of liberty and restraint, the convention doubled as an opportunity to deal a "devastating blow" to America's adversaries.

As reflected in these comments, the peace being promoted at Annapolis was without question a *pax Americana*. This vision excluded the single option that might have held some prospect for setting the conditions for an authentic peace process. Such an option would have entailed a cease-fire between all Palestinian factions and Israel that ended attacks by both sides (denying Israel the 'right' to conduct land and air raids into Gaza or to engage in assassinations), opened Gaza's borders to normal commerce, and generated the political space for negotiations.[62] Such terms were precluded in advance from consideration because they would necessarily require the inclusion of Hamas, which was at odds with the realignment of the region. Thus, peace may never have been more elusive than at Annapolis.

So long as the appearance of a peace process is privileged over the fundamentals of making such a process genuine, there is little reason to expect more from future American-led efforts. In fact, to the extent that the Obama administration persists in maintaining the same divide between moderates and extremists, new efforts are likely to face the similar local scepticism

and opposition. As Robert Malley and Hussein Agha write, Obama cannot achieve success by

> strengthening those leaders viewed by their own people as at best weak, incompetent and feckless, at worst irresponsible, careless and reckless. It won't be done by perpetuating the bogus and unhelpful distinction between extremists and moderates, by isolating the former, reaching out to the latter, and ending up disconnected from the region's most relevant actors. It won't be done by trying to perform better what was performed before.[63]

While Obama no doubt enjoys greater personal popularity than Bush, this does not mean that local groups will be any more willing to jettison their own interests and commitments. Regardless of spokesperson, intertwining the real goal of resolving regional conflict with the empty rhetoric of moderation imperils nascent efforts at actual coexistence on the ground.

Unfortunately, the Obama administration's principal foreign policy initiative in its first year – the 'new' Afghanistan-Pakistan policy – suggests continuity not only with the language of millennialism but also with that of the extremists-moderates binary. President Obama's campaign promises to reprioritise the Afghanistan conflict, while beginning a troop drawdown in Iraq, were hailed as representing a new and more strategically viable American approach to the 'war on terror.' Within weeks of assuming office, Obama remarked in an interview that the 'surge' model in Iraq might be transferable to Afghanistan. Specifically, he noted the success of drawing moderate elements of the Sunni leadership in Iraq into alliance with the US and suggested that there might be 'comparable opportunities' to identify moderates in Afghanistan and Pakistan.[64]

In practice, this has meant once again viewing the strengthening of moderates as a key means for pursuing the transformative agenda of remaking the region from one of perpetual violence into one of peace and security. Such an approach entails entrenching alliances with leaders like the presidents of Pakistan and Afghanistan. In this context, support is not pegged to domestic legitimacy or liberalising credentials, but instead to their continued usefulness in the service of American goals. At the same time, it has meant using massive economic and defence transfers to expand the internal security and military machinery in both countries.[65] The financial and military costs for the US and its local partners are extensive and have been projected as an indefinite annual commitment many fold greater than Afghanistan's yearly revenue.[66] As analysts are beginning to note, the probable result of these policies may well be the creation of a militarised and authoritarian state in Afghanistan, one that is permanently dependent on foreign aid.[67] Yet, the only responses envisioned by either the Bush or Obama administration remain wedded to the discourses of moderation and pacification, and

require imposing preferred regional allies through force – at whatever the cost. As Rory Stewart has observed:

> The fundamental assumptions remain that an ungoverned or hostile Afghanistan is a threat to global security; that the West has the ability to address the threat and bring prosperity and security; that this is justified and a moral obligation; that economic development and order in Afghanistan will contribute to global security; that these different objectives reinforce each other; and that there is no real alternative.[68]

This vision of the transformative power of external intervention in the region and its ability to secure pacification in perpetuity comes at a high cost indeed, not only financially but in terms of the long-term interests of the local population. Rather than addressing the underlying ethnic and tribal competition that has given rise to instability and violence in Afghanistan, or the cross-border grievances that have destabilised the region for over half a century, the American strategy would identify, arm, and finance the preferred local forces of moderation. In all likelihood, the result will be the imposition of specific elites, whose power to maintain authority ultimately resides in the willingness of the US to sustain them through indefinite external pressure. In the process, the region's political disputes will be frozen and alternatives imprisoned within a paradigm derived from and responsive to American, rather than indigenous, priorities.

CONCLUSION: A PLEA FOR SELF-DETERMINATION AND AMERICAN RESTRAINT

This article has canvassed the various guises of today's prevailing Wilsonianism, moving from the language of democracy promotion to moderation. Despite the emphasis by American policy makers on these moral aims, virtually no Middle Eastern country is appreciably freer than it was prior to the advent of the Bush administration.[69] The gap between words and deeds is not, however, peculiar to the Bush presidency, as continuities across administration and political party make evident. Rather, this gap arises from the contradiction between espousing claims of democracy on the one hand and connecting them to American national security interests on the other – security interests which require a permanent global footprint.

Two potential correctives follow from this account. First, one might argue for simply abandoning the substantive moral claims often attached by the US to policies designed to advance national interests. After all, there is little that is surprising about the observation that the United States is more interested in stabilising a status quo conducive to its objectives than in reshaping the Middle East around a set of abstract ideals. If policy makers

were to pursue American interests in the region by referencing the mutual gains to be had, in pragmatic and straightforwardly realist terms, and without resort to claims of the moral superiority of its actions or its projects, it would likely occasion less vehement popular resentment.

American actions that espouse democracy promotion while extending support to autocratic allies, in the process undermining reformers and protracting factional conflicts, have had a doubly corrosive effect. Such actions tar the language of democratisation with the brush of hypocrisy and channel opposition to extra-political, and at times violent, means. This can be corrected to some extent by conceding that the US is no longer in the democracy promotion business. Leaving the question of domestic political reform to local actors, America could concentrate on its current policy priorities in the region, namely, reliable access to resources and extending its spatial footprint through the secure stationing of military assets. This would redirect popular resentments born of local political conditions toward the autocrats responsible for those conditions and away from an external patron. Just as China does not face regional resentment for its investments, so the US might pursue its regional priorities without provoking the ire of political opposition groups striving for reform.

Still, while such pragmatism may reduce corrosive blowback effects, it nonetheless would not address the serious legitimacy crises plaguing local allies and thus ultimately would be ineffective. In the event that these allies face internal instability, the US would inevitably be confronted with the question of whether to prop up weak but friendly regimes. In this context, the repudiation of Wilsonian language in favour of a pragmatic orientation would not shield the US from local resentment and resistance so long as it conceives its strategic interests as requiring a pro-American order premised on the entrenchment of current allies. This is because shoring up these regimes may well embroil the US in direct or indirect forms of coercion should they experience internal pressure. Relying on the support of local proxies that do not, themselves, enjoy popular support may well remain an unstable strategy even stripped of self-defeating moral claims.

In the final analysis, any American policy that rejects continuous intervention to protect compliant allies would require a profound rethinking of its orientation to the Middle East as well as its foundational commitment to geographical omnipresence. The current American global footprint perpetuates the view of a world in crisis, in which the US must intervene decisively wherever its interests are imperilled. In essence, it justifies coercive actions that undermine the very possibility of local and authentic democratic developments. Reconceiving both the US's orientation to the region and its global footprint would entail developing a geopolitical vision that refrains from dictating outcomes, but allows autonomous developments within states to determine the nature of their respective regimes. It means rejecting the idea of the US as an international police power, responsible for

securing democratic tranquility and organised globally through a network of ever-expanding military outposts.

Thus, the second – and more trenchant – corrective that emerges from this analysis is that the US may best protect its interests in the region by repudiating a politics of intervention and omnipresence whether articulated in terms of Wilsonianism or amoral realpolitik. Half a century of American policy in the region demonstrates that the domestic legitimacy of unpopular regimes cannot be secured externally, least of all by efforts to redescribe local autocrats as regional democrats. Supporting these regimes is costly and, in the long term, intrinsically unstable precisely because of their precariousness. Whereas regional partners that are not internally weak would free US assets for more efficient use, at present resources are repeatedly diverted to serve the needs of ailing partners. Furthermore, in viewing all local crises as threatening forms of disorder, the US has employed massive economic and military assets to freeze disputes in ways that prevent lasting resolutions on the ground. In fact, the exercise of American power has had the primary tendency of orchestrating temporary victories. These victories merely prolong conflicts, because they are only sustainable if the US maintains a coercive thumb on local scales. Rather than creating conditions for the end of US interference and the retrenchment of American resources, intervention in local affairs has primarily worked to create the need for yet more indefinite intervention. If anything, an American regional interest in peaceful coexistence has actually been compromised by its very commitment to international police power and global expansiveness, geopolitical strategies that have produced an overstretched military and have promoted neither democracy nor stability.

Abandoning the American goal of permanent peace – a goal that, in the Middle East, has taken the form of stabilising a pro-American order – may also be required for a broader regional settlement. This settlement would enable local parties to address and resolve underlying conflicts obscured by external intervention. The emergence of an internally stable and locally legitimate order in the Middle East would likely do a far better job of securing America's long-term interests in reliable access to resources and markets. But such a fundamental revision of US strategy would have to maintain a commitment to local self-determination and conflict-resolution even where the dynamics of domestic legitimacy and regional mediation might seem at odds with short-term American goals.

This may well mean reducing economic and military aid to regional allies, which serves primarily to sustain an internal balance of power inconsistent with local preferences. For example, limiting support for Mubarak and allowing for procedurally fair political contestation in Egypt might eventually end the NDP's one-party rule. At the very least, it would likely force the NDP to renegotiate its relationship with Egyptians by building a broader social base and making real and meaningful concessions. Either way, this

process might bring revisionist parties to the political table, occasioning a reassessment of the nature of Egyptian-American relations. But a rene-gotiated partnership with a new government that enjoys greater domestic legitimacy may be less costly and more secure in the long-term than betting on the indefinite ability of the Mubarak clan to leverage foreign assistance into a monopoly on power.

The primary legacy of recent American actions has been deep scep-ticism throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds towards US intentions. To the extent that American political identity and thus geopolitical discourse and practice remain bound to both millennialism and territorial overreach, efforts at democracy promotion will persist as a doomed enterprise. They will either yield sham elections that accord with American objectives at the expense of democracy or bring to power anti-American forces at the expense of those objectives. In other words, the conjunction of moral mission and realpolitik is not a sustainable formula for the advancement of values or interests. Thus, a successful US foreign policy in the Middle East would likely need to be considerably more restrained. Such a foreign policy might advance democracy, but only insofar as democracy is understood in terms of actual self-determination rather than as an outcome produced by American interference or conducive to short-term interests.

Unfortunately, the likelihood of a geopolitical shift remains slim, for reasons that go beyond lobbying groups, bureaucratic incoherence, and the legacy of both September 11 and neo-conservatism. Both political parties continue to take as given the centrality of pacification and global omnipres-ence for the promotion of American interests, despite the extent to which the experience of the last decade underscores the counter-productivity of these policies. A repudiation of the prevailing discourse and practice would entail a fundamental domestic reappraisal of the US's place in the world. At present and for the foreseeable future, there is little internal popular and elite willingness for such a reappraisal. Yet, perhaps simply by appreciating the pathologies embedded in our current framework, we can begin to think seriously about the conditions necessary for change.

NOTES

1. These numbers are collected in Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books 2004) pp. 156–160.

2. For a more systematic historical discussion of the role of millennial ideals in American foreign policy and political identity, see Aziz Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom* (Harvard University Press, forthcoming); David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, Rev. Ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota 1998).

3. For example, see Tamara Cofman Wittes and Richard Youngs, 'Europe, The United States and Middle Eastern Democracy: Repairing the Breach', *Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution* (Jan. 2009) (Analysis Paper No. 18), available at <http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2009/01_middle_eastern_democracy_wittes.aspx>.

4. John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2007).

5. For example, see Kurt M. Campbell and Derek Chollet, 'The New Tribalism: Cliques and the Making of U.S. Foreign Policy', *The Washington Quarterly* 30/1 (Winter 2006–2007) pp. 193–203 (arguing that interagency rivalries and partisan foreign policy 'cliques' are a key component in explaining the formulation of US foreign policy).

6. In particular, we take from Gearóid Tuathail and John Agnew an emphasis on how discursive frameworks regarding territory "'spatialize' international politics" and shape global relations of political power. Gearóid Tuathail and John Agnew, 'Geopolitics and Discourse: Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in American foreign Policy', *Political Geography* 11/2 (1992) p. 190.

7. Department of Defense, Office of the Deputy Undersecretary of Defense (Installations and Environment), *Base Structure Report*, Fiscal Year 2009, p. DOD-22; Department of Defense, 'Active Duty Military Personnel Strengths by Regional Area and by Country', 30 June 2009, available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2009/hst0906.pdf>.

8. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 'SIPRI Yearbook 2009: Appendix 5A. Military Expenditure Data, 1999–2008', available at <http://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2009/05/05A>. For a detailed discussion of the relationship between spiralling military budgets and US sense of permanent, see Julien Mercille, 'Mind the Gap: Security 'Crises' and the Geopolitics of U.S. Military Spending', *Geopolitics* 13/1 (2008) p. 54.

9. See generally John Agnew, *Hegemony: The New Shape of Global Power* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 2005).

10. Ibid., pp. 1–2.

11. See generally Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1968).

12. John Winthrop, 'A Model of Christian Charity', in Edmund S. Morgan (ed.), *Puritan Political Ideas 1558–1794* (New York: Hackett Publish 2003) p. 93.

13. NCS-68, 'U.S. Objectives and Programs for National Security' (1950), available at <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/nsc-68/nsc68-1.htm>.

14. For a post-September 11 account of the continuing role of millennial language in US foreign policy and national identity, see Paul T. McCartney, 'American Nationalism and U.S. Foreign Policy from September 11 to the Iraq War', *Political Science Quarterly* 119/3 (2004) p. 399.

15. For a discussion of the shift from Wilsonian liberalism to neoconservative democracy promotion, see Jonathan Monten, 'The Roots of the Bush Doctrine: Power, Nationalism and Democracy Promotion in U.S. Strategy', *International Security* 29/4 (Spring 2005) p. 112.

16. George W. Bush, 'State of the Union Address', *White House Office of the Press Secretary* (28 Jan. 2003), available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/01/print/20030128-19.html>.

17. Barack H. Obama, 'Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan', *White House Office of the Press Secretary* (27 March 2009), available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-on-a-New-Strategy-for-Afghanistan-and-Pakistan>.

18. Ibid.

19. Anne-Marie Slaughter, 'Wilsonianism in the Twenty-First Century', in G. John Ikenberry, Thomas J. Knock, Anne-Marie Slaughter, and Tony Smith (eds.), *The Crisis of American Foreign Policy: Wilsonianism in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2009) p. 115.

20. Ibid.

21. Barack H. Obama, 'Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize', *White House Office of the Press Secretary* (Dec. 10, 2009), available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize>.

22. George W. Bush, 'Address at Swearing-In Ceremony for Second Term', *White House Office of the Press Secretary* (20 Jan. 2005), available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/01/20050120-1.html>.

23. Fouad Ajami, 'We Have George W. Bush to Thank for the Arab Democratic Spring', *Daily Star* (Lebanon: 23 May 2005).

24. Michael Hirsh and Daniel Klaidman, 'Washington: Condi's Clout Offensive', *Newsweek* (14 March 2005).

25. The only possible exception would be the case of the Lebanese electoral system, but this counter-example was complicated historically by the Syrian presence in the country.

26. "During his May 2005 visit to Washington, Mahmoud Abbas reportedly struck a chord with US officials, including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, arguing that a clean Fatah victory – which he then confidently predicted – would deal Sunni Islamist militancy a profound setback in the region." International Crisis Group, 'Enter Hamas: The Challenges of Political Integration', *Middle East Report* 49 (18 Jan. 2006) p. 10.

27. "As a political party, Hamas revealed itself to be disciplined, pragmatic and surprisingly flexible. It fielded well-regarded candidates, including doctors and academics. In some cases, Hamas aligned itself with independents once affiliated with the secular Fatah party." Fotini Christia and Sreemati Mitter, 'Hamas at the Helm', *New York Times* (27 Jan. 2006).

28. For an example, see Nathan Brown, 'Aftermath of the Hamas Tsunami', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, available at <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/BrownHamasWebCommentary.pdf> p. 2.

29. International Crisis Group, 'Enter Hamas', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, available at <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/BrownHamasWebCommentary.pdf> p. 32.

30. The Quartet on the Middle East is a group comprised of the United Nations, the US, the European Union and Russia, which was formally established in 2002 to serve as a mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In this context, mobilizing the nations represented by the Quartet to boycott the Palestinian Authority – the elected representative of one of the two parties in the conflict the Quartet was to mediate – is especially troubling.

31. International Crisis Group, 'After Gaza', *Middle East Report* 68 (2 Aug. 2007) p. i.

32. "They say they acted in response to efforts to undermine their electoral mandate and obstruct their ability to govern and to pre-empt plans within Fatah to confront them militarily with US, Israeli and Arab aid. They argue they had no choice, given the need to reverse a deteriorating security situation that was part of the effort to bring them down." Ibid., p. 1. The report also contains valuable analysis of the role played by Dahlan in the conflagration in Gaza at pages 8–9. The belated discovery of Fatah as the horse to back in the Palestinian territories is ironic given the damage done to Fatah by international isolation from 2000–2006. Indeed, the Oslo peace process and Palestinian relations with the international community were the undoing of whatever political legitimacy Fatah leaders once enjoyed in the Palestinian territories. Under Oslo, they came to be seen by Palestinians as representatives of an illegitimate government installed under conditions of occupation and implicated in Israeli practices.

33. Ibid., p. 1.

34. 'Abdelbari 'Atwan, 'Rule by Decree', *Al-Quds al-Arabi* (4 Sept. 2007) (noting that "Palestinian President Abbas' resort to rule by decree threatens to turn the PA into another Arab dictatorial regime").

35. In a rare example of the International Committee of the Red Cross making a public statement based on its activities, the ICRC issued an urgent humanitarian appeal for Gaza. The ICRC Director of Operations for the Middle East was quoted by the *BBC* as arguing that "in Gaza the whole strip is being strangled, economically speaking, life there has become a nightmare. And for that there is no solution that can be provided by humanitarian organizations." 'Red Cross Demands Mid-East Action', *BBC* (13 Dec. 2007), available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7141875.stm>.

36. Alex Spillius and Dina Kraft, 'Hillary to Offer $1 Billion to Gaza in Move to Sideline Hamas', *The Daily Telegraph* (1 March 2009), available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/4903829/Hillary-Clinton-to-offer-1bn-to-Gaza-in-move-to-sideline-Hamas.html>.

37. 'General Dayton admits the U.S. is helping Fatah', *Jerusalem Post* (27 May 2007).

38. For a careful discussion of the expiration of the current Palestinian Authority's electoral mandate, see Nathan J. Brown, 'Palestinian Presidential Elections', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (July 2008).

39. Barack Obama, 'Remarks by the President on a New Beginning', *White House Office of the Press Secretary* (4 June 2009), available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09>.

40. The monies spent on training and arming the LAF and ISF were often described by Bush administration officials as part of a broader policy of seeking the "full implementation of UN Security Council 1701" – code for disarming Hezbollah, the principal unimplemented provision of the resolution. For example, see Office of the Spokesman, 'U.S. Delivers Police Vehicles to the Lebanese Internal Security Forces', *U.S. Department of State Bureau of Public Affairs* (2 July 2009).

41. Michele J. Sison, 'Statement of Ambassador-Designate to Lebanon before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee', *U.S. Department of State Bureau of Public Affairs* (23 July 2008).

42. This also meant that the US placed clear conditions on military assistance that arms provided to the Lebanese army *not* be used against Israel, but strictly for internal security purposes. Natacha Yazbeck and Saleh Hodaifeh, 'Talking to Michele Sison', *Lebanon Now* (Feb. 2009) (interview with Ambassador Sison).

43. 'US Vice-President Joe Biden visits Lebanon', *BBC* (22 May 2009), available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8063111.stm>.

44. For background on this impasse and the American role in demanding a hard-line from the Siniora government, see Stephen Zunes, 'Lebanon Intrusion', *Foreign Policy in Focus* (10 June 2008).

45. For a discussion of the development and ultimate collapse of the Future movement militia, see Borzou Daragahi and Raed Rafei, 'Lebanon's Sunni Bloc Built Militia, Officials Say', *The Los Angeles Times* (12 May 2008).

46. Sam Ghattas, 'Biden Links U.S. Aid to Outcome of Lebanese Election', *AP News* (22 May 2009), available at <http://wire.antiwar.com/2009/05/22/biden-links-us-aid-to-outcome-of-lebanon-election>.

47. Ibid.

48. In his blog, Satloff writes: "Biden's surprise visit to Beirut on May 22 was not just gutsy. By reminding Lebanese voters that Washington will review financial assistance and other aspects of our relations with Lebanon depending on the outcome of the election, Biden played Middle East hardball. Lebanese voters – especially the critical swing Christian voters – seem to have gotten the message. They cast their ballots in droves for candidates opposed to the Hezbollah-backed alliance and, in so doing, appear to have turned the tide in the election." He contrasts Biden's "hardball" with his dismay at the lack of threats or sticks in Obama's Cairo speech but then expresses the hope that behind Cairo's rhetoric is a set of policies in line with his own preferences and thus continuous with those of the previous administration. Robert Satloff, 'Biden's Hardball Pays Off in Lebanon', available at <http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/mesh/2009/06/bidens-hardball-pays-off-in-lebanon>.

49. For a sense of the pervasive sense of frustration with American policy in the Arab press and policy circles, see Editorial, 'The US is Colluding in the Trampling of Democracy in Egypt', *The Daily Star* (Lebanon: 6 Aug. 2008); Rami G. Khoury, 'Time to Bring Home Arab Human Development', *Saudi-US Relations Information Service* (21 Jan. 2005) (arguing that "for the U.S. government to speak of Arab liberty, on the one hand, while using financial blackmail, on the other hand, to squash this exercise of free-thinking Arab activism, is a sign of precisely Washington's double standards, presumptuous arrogance and pro-Israeli bias that cause so many people in the Middle East – and the rest of the world – to criticize the U.S. these days"); Mohamad Salah, 'Bad U.S. Diplomacy', *Al Hayat* (18 Nov. 2008) (translated in *Mideast Mirror, Section B (The Arab World)* (18 Nov. 2008)).

50. There is a striking parallel between the preoccupations of American policy makers and commentators on American policy in the press and the academy. As American policy makers made the rhetorical transition from democracy to moderation, so the emphasis in policy and media circles shifted to concern with moderate rather than democratic forces in the region. For a discussion of the historical relationship between American hegemonic designs and scholarship in international relations, see Robert Vitalis, 'International Studies in America', *Social Science Research Council Items and Issues* 3/1 (Summer 2002).

51. An influential and representative articulation of this position comes from Fareed Zakaria in his book, *The Future of Freedom*, which calls for moderation and liberty as the principal focus of American foreign policy. Zakaria argues that although electoral practices are gaining increasing global sway, these practices are as likely to result in illiberal and oppressive regimes as they are to secure stability and liberal rights. See generally Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: W.W. Norton 2004).

52. Sean McCormack, 'Daily Press Briefing State Department', *U.S. Department of State Office of the Press Secretary* (20 March 2007), available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2007/mar/81963.htm>. For a detailed discussion of the course of the Egyptian elections in 2005, see Aslı Bâli, 'From Subjects to Citizens? The Shifting Paradigm of Electoral Authoritarianism in the Middle East', *Middle East Law and Governance: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 1/1 (2008).

53. Amnesty International, 'Egypt: Proposed Constitutional Amendments Greatest Erosion of Human Rights in 26 Years' (18 March 2007).

54. Nathan Brown, Michele Dunne and Amr Hamzawy, 'Egypt's Controversial Constitutional Amendments', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (23 March 2007).

55. Andrew Exum and Zack Snyder, 'Democracy Demotion in Egypt: Is the US a Willing Accomplice?', *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy Watch #1212 (23 March 2007).

56. Stephen Zunes, 'How Not to Support Democracy in the Middle East', *Foreign Policy in Focus* (8 June 2009), available at <http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/6173>.

57. 'Obama Interview: The Transcript', *BBC News* (2 June 2009), available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/news/2009/06/090602_obama_transcript.shtml>.

58. For a statement of the "Forward Strategy of Freedom," see 'Fact Sheet: President Bush Calls for a "Forward Strategy of Freedom" to Promote Democracy in the Middle East', *White House Office of the Press Secretary* (6 Nov. 2003), available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-11.html>.

59. For an example, see Robin Wright, 'Iran: The Uninvited Wildcard in Mideast Talks', *Washington Post* (27 Nov. 2007) p. A12; Michael Oren, 'Middle East Peace Through Anxiety', *New York Times* (2 Dec. 2007); and Robert Blecher, 'In Annapolis, Conflict By Other Means', *Middle East Report* (26 Nov. 2007). The Arab press also saw Annapolis as largely about building support for a confrontation with Iran. For an example, see Amin Qammouriyyeh, 'Maximum Offer', *An-Nahar* (Lebanon: 27 Nov. 2007), (arguing that Annapolis was convened because President Bush felt the need "to be armed to the teeth with 'moderate' allies in his counterattack against the camp of 'evil' who were not called to Annapolis but left at home: Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah"); 'Urayb al-Rintawi, 'Waiting for Bush', *Ad-Dustour* (Jordan: 27 Nov. 2007) (arguing that a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is valued by the US administration "because it facilitates lining the Arab moderates up behind Washington in its campaigns against Iran and its allies").

60. 'Big Turnout, Small Result', *The Economist* (29 Nov. 2007).

61. George W. Bush, 'Remarks by President Bush to Open Annapolis Convention', *Department of State Office of the Press Secretary* (27 Nov. 2007), available at <http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/2007/95695.htm>.

62. For a discussion of what such a deal might have resembled, see Jackson Diehl, 'Fuses in Gaza', *Washington Post* (3 Dec. 2007).

63. Hussein Agha and Robert Malley, 'Obama and the Middle East', *New York Review of Books* (11 June 2009), available at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/22731>.

64. 'Obama Mulls Reaching Out to Moderate Taliban: Report', *Reuters* (7 March 2009); and Helene Cooper and Sheryl Gay Stolberg, 'Obama Ponders Outreach to Elements of Taliban', *The New York Times* (8 March 2009).

65. Proponents of the 'surge' model in Afghanistan argue that in addition to the influx of American forces, the strategy will require a doubling or more of the Afghan National Army and police forces. For an example, see John Nagl, 'Surge in Afghanistan Can Work, With Right Resources, Enough Time', *U.S. News & World Report* (23 Feb. 2009).

66. Commonly cited estimates of the combined cost of the Iraq and Afghanistan military commitments range from several trillion dollars, according to prominent economists Joseph Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes, to the Congressional Budget Office's 2007 estimate of $2.4 trillion through to 2017. The portion of these costs attributable to the Afghan theatre of operation is roughly one-third, or nearly $1 trillion dollars. Linda Bilmes and Joseph Stiglitz, *The Economic Costs of the Iraq War: An Appraisal Three Years After the Beginning of the Conflict*, Working Paper No. 12054 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, Feb. 2006); Peter Orszag, 'Estimated Costs of U.S. Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and of Other Activities Related to the War on Terrorism', *United States Congressional Budget Office* (24 Oct. 2007), available at <http://www.cbo.gov/ftpdocs/86xx/doc8690/10-24-CostOfWar_Testimony.pdf>.

67. Rory Stewart, the director of Harvard's Carr Center for Human Rights, offers a critique of President Obama's speech and the policy it introduces, arguing that external dependence and authoritarianism are the most likely outcomes. Rory Stewart, 'The Irresistible Illusion', *The London Review of Books* (9 July 2009) pp. 3–6. For another critique, see Andrew Bacevich, 'Afghanistan Surge Is Not Worth the Cost in Blood and Treasure', *U.S. News & World Report* (23 Feb. 2009).

68. Stewart (note 66) p. 6.

69. One common metric for gauging the degree of freedom in a given country is the Freedom House evaluation based on their scoring of political and civil liberties. According to these rankings, of the principal eighteen Arab states, only Bahrain and Lebanon have changed status in a positive direction during this period. (Excluded from our list of Arab states are: the Comoros Islands, Djibouti, Mauritania and Somalia.) In the Lebanese case, the Freedom House score is not a reflection of domestic changes. Rather, as the narrative description of their analysis makes clear, it is the Syrian departure that is viewed as liberalisation, moving the country from "not free" to "partially free" in 2006. With

respect to Bahrain, Freedom House also registers a slight improvement of the country's score taking it from the higher end of the "not free" category to the lowest rungs of "partially free." However, the narrative explanation of this change in coding suggests little substantive improvement. The principal change was the holding, for the first time in 30 years, of elections for the lower house of parliament. Still, political parties remained illegal, four main opposition groups boycotted the vote, the lower house was subject to the veto of an upper house appointed by the monarchy, and Freedom House noted that widespread gerrymandering of districts diluted the majority Shi'a vote, as did measures to enfranchise non-Bahraini Sunnis from elsewhere in the Gulf. Each of these features limited the democratic legitimacy of the election. Inexplicably, Freedom House also scores Yemen as having made a transition from its status as "not free" to "partially free" in the year 2005. Yet, the actual scores on political rights and civil liberties in Yemen did not improve from the previous year and the narrative analysis offered in defence of this change of status described a "downward trend arrow due to governmental restrictions on press freedom." 'Freedom House Country Report: Yemen (2005)', available at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=363&year=2005&country=6864>.