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We Need a New Vision for the Greater Middle East
By Lawrence J. Haas

Though President Barack Obama and Gov. Mitt Romney are clashing mightily over United States policy toward the Greater Middle East -- Iran and the bomb, the terror in Benghazi, and so on -- neither one is addressing the need for a new, visionary framework that serves U.S. interests in the region.

For most of the post-World War II period, U.S. policy toward the region rested on a “stability” model that reflected a bargain between Washington and Western-leaning autocrats: The United States would provide the military and other support that would help them retain power, and they would keep the oil flowing while controlling the dangerous anti-American forces within their countries.

But that model has faced two challenges over the last decade: President George W. Bush’s post-9/11 “freedom agenda” and the “Arab Spring” that, together, have left U.S. policy toward the region uncertain and inadequate.

Bush’s freedom agenda reflected longstanding U.S. efforts to promote freedom and democracy around the world that, due to geopolitical concerns, Washington had never applied rigorously to the Greater Middle East. He best enunciated it in his second inaugural address in January 2005, when he proclaimed:

“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. There is only one force of history that can break the reign of hatred and resentment, and expose the pretensions of tyrants, and reward the hopes of the decent and tolerant, and that is the force of human freedom ... 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.”

Five months later in Cairo, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice explained what that would mean for U.S. policy toward the region:

“For 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region here in the Middle East -- and we achieved neither. Now, we are taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people.”

But, while Bush’s rhetorical push incited democratic fervor in the region, he soon learned the risks inherent in pushing too much, too soon. Sectarian conflict threatened democracy-building in post-Saddam Iraq, while the terrorist group Hamas exploited Bush’s call for speedy elections in the Palestinian territories by first sweeping the parliamentary elections and then mounting a violent coup in Gaza.

Though a chastened Bush retreated to the comfort of stability in his later years, the free and democratic genie had left the regional bottle, presaging the cataclysmic events that began in late 2010 when a desperate fruit peddler in Tunisia set himself afire, igniting the “Arab Spring” protests.

With millions of people taking to the streets in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Jordan, Morocco, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and elsewhere, a cautious President Obama took a country-by-country approach to the region.

While he pushed aside Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak and joined a NATO effort to provide the military protection that enabled rebel forces to oust Libya’s Muammar Gadhafi, he looked aside as Saudi King Abdullah and other pro-Western autocrats cracked down on the democratic aspirants within their borders and he has refused to intervene forcefully while Syria’s Bashar al-Assad slaughters his own people.

Meanwhile, the protests that toppled autocrats also positioned anti-democratic forces to fill the vacuum. Most important, the Muslim Brotherhood won power through the ballot in Egypt and is maneuvering for power in countries, such as Libya and Syria, whose future remains far less certain.

Though they differ in their specifics, both the Bush and Obama approaches to the region have proved inadequate to the challenges at hand.

Bush tried to quickly force-feed freedom and democracy onto the region through speedy elections, ignoring the hard work of building opposition parties, civil society and an independent media that are the hallmarks of real freedom and democracy and that ensure their long-term vitality.

Though he spoke at times of promoting freedom and democracy, Obama sought mostly a return to regional stability through U.S. cooperation with such autocrats as Russia’s Vladimir Putin and Turkey’s Recep Erdogan and U.S. outreach to the Muslim Brotherhood and other rising, though dangerous, forces.

Neither approach can serve U.S. interests in the years to come. We can’t try to install democracy on the cheap. But, we also can’t once again rely on autocrats to maintain stability, for the people of the region have made clear that they want a brighter future of more economic prosperity and governmental accountability.

Consequently, whoever occupies the Oval Office in the next four years will need an approach that, while protecting America’s short-term security concerns, will help meet those long-term popular aspirations. That will make for a freer and more democratic region from which we will benefit back home.

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