

Bush's Middle East Plan

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By Afzaal Mahmood

UNVEILING a bold vision of sweeping changes and restructuring of systems in the region, the US president, George W. Bush, has, for the first time, outlined his plan for a democratic post-war Mideast. Seeking to answer opponents in Europe and the Arab world, who have accused him of rushing to war, Mr Bush, addressing the conservative American Enterprise Institute a few days ago, argued that "a new regime in Iraq would serve as a dramatic and inspiring example of freedom to other nations of the region."

His message contained an implied warning for the host of the despotic and dynastic Arab governments, including close allies like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, that unless they changed, they too might be swept away. It is an irony of history that the US president, who once criticized even Mr Clinton's modest reconstruction efforts in the Balkans, has now come forward with a quixotic reform plan for the Arab world on a scale not witnessed since the Americans rebuilt Japan and Germany after the Second World War.

His critics recall that during his presidential campaign Mr Bush only called for "a humble US foreign policy." "We must be proud and confident of our values," he then had stated, "but humble in how we treat nations that are figuring out how to chart their own course". But all that has changed. The shock of September 11 seems to have brought about a radical transformation. Mr Bush now speaks of remaking the Middle East along the US lines. According to media reports, Washington is of the view that it made a fundamental mistake by putting oil security, the fight against communism and the security of its regional bases over and above the democratic evolution of Middle Eastern countries.

Having arrived at that conclusion, Mr Bush now wants to pursue a wholly new foreign policy in the region that aims at "bringing hope and progress into the lives of millions", as he put it the other day. This obviously implies changing the political landscape of the whole region. "Bush and his advisers believe they are on the right side of 'a growing historical wave', the *Washington Post* wrote on February 25, "Within Bush's inner circle, Iraq represents the intersection of a security threat and a geopolitical opportunity."

It has not escaped the attention of US policy makers that most of the perpetrators of September 11 tragedy came from a country that has been traditionally friendly towards the United States. The argument is that anti-Americanism has at least partly flourished because of the frustration and resentment that grow when economic opportunity and political freedom do not exist in countries controlled by corrupt and despotic rulers. Washington now reportedly believes that it is not enough to go hunting for "terrorist crocodiles; it must drain the swamp too."

The Bush critics, however, point out that the Americans have never cared about Middle Eastern democracy before, so why should they take the Bush plan seriously now? To many sceptics Bush's scheme for a democratic post-war Middle East looks like "outright fantasy". Also, it is being argued that you cannot impose democracy from above, especially on a society that has no real democratic traditions. The supporters of the plan refer to the democratization of Japan after World War II.

US General Douglas MacArthur successfully built Japan along democratic lines despite the fact that the Japanese society did not have any significant democratic traditions until then. In countries that once gave birth to fascism and militarism, liberty and democracy have found a permanent home.

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war Middle East, Mr Bush has interestingly linked the overthrow of Saddam Hussein with the creation of "a truly democratic Palestinian state". The linkage partly explains the obsession of the Bush administration with the change of regime in Iraq. "The passing of Saddam Hussein's regime", argues Mr Bush, "will deprive the terrorist network of a wealthy patron that pays for terrorist training and offers rewards to families of suicide bombers."

On the Palestinian question too, Mr Bush has revealed his real aim. Not long ago, he faulted his predecessor for devoting too much time and presidential prestige to a failed effort to broker Israeli-Palestinian peace. Now he has even offered his "personal commitment" to achieve "a free, democratic, viable and independent Palestine" alongside Israel.

The thinking in Washington appears to be that solving the Arab-Israeli dispute would remove one of the chief grievances that has helped fuel anti-Americanism in the region which in turn has further complicated the fight against terror. But a closer look at the Bush plan will reveal that the keenness to change the regime in Baghdad is also designed to provide long-term security to Israel.

It would knock out the strongest pillar of the "rejectionist front" — Iraq, Iran and Syria — that has consistently opposed peace with Israel. The head of Israel's army, Lt. Gen Moshe Yaalon has significantly stated recently that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein would set off "a regional earthquake" undermining hardline states and "strengthening" pragmatic elements.

Given Washington's past reluctance to sufficiently pressure Tel Aviv to reach a just

settlement with the Palestinians, will Mr Bush be able to fulfil his "personal commitment" after his victory over Mr Hussein? Does the recent statement of hawkish Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon that Israel is ready to make "painful concessions" signify that the creation of an independent Palestinian state is now acceptable to him?

Mr Sharon has recently won a hardline mandate from the Israeli voters and leads a coalition government that includes two extreme right-wing religious parties bitterly opposed to the creation of an independent and viable Palestinian state. Unless Mr Bush is prepared for a real arm-twisting of Israel it is doubtful if the overthrow of Mr Hussein will automatically result in the solution of Palestinian-Israeli problem.

Mr Bush has pledged to bring democracy and freedom to Iraq and has further stated that "all the Iraqis must have a voice in the new government". But how will he reconcile the basic principle of democracy — rule by the majority — with the desire of his close Arab allies who want the present system to continue in Iraq, after the overthrow of Mr Hussein, to ensure that the Sunni minority continues to rule over the country which has 65 per cent of Shiite population?

Of course, the most important part of the Bush plan relates to changing the political landscape of the whole region. He has given a clear

warning to autocratic Arab governments that unless they change and bring about democratic reforms they will be swept away. It is widely believed that if the American-led military action against Iraq goes ahead, Saddam Hussein is not the only leader whose regime will topple in the aftermath of war.

It is significant to note that though officially all the Arab states oppose the war against Iraq, their leaders seem to be trapped between the fear of their people and the fear of the United States. Half a dozen of Arab states have offered their territories as launching pads for the coming onslaught.

And even those who have not (such as Egypt) are deemed to be colluding with the Arab-American war camp.

Another strange phenomenon has been the apathy and lack of concern shown by the vast majority of the Arabs to the coming American invasion of Iraq. While massive demonstrations against the Bush plan have taken place across the globe (even in countries closely allied to the United States) nothing of the sort has occurred in the Arab countries. Even mild public protests have been missing.

Is it because of the ruthless repression with which Arab governments counter any serious manifestation of the popular will? Or is it because the disgust with the existing order is so deep and widespread that many Arabs will actually welcome the collapse of the present system?

Or is the outward calm no measure of the pent-up anger that lies beneath the surface which maybe ignited when the first missile falls on Baghdad? Only the coming days will provide an answer to these agonizing questions.