

Movements of Change – II ^[1]

Amman, Jordan – 11 December 2004

Yesterday I wrote about the opportunities the Palestinian election and, to a lesser extent, the slow rise of a new generation of Arab leaders offer for people throughout this region. Today I want to talk about what the US can and should do to help this process along.

At the root of all American problems in the Middle East – running beneath anger about our presence in the Arabian Peninsula, our invasion of Iraq or even our one-sided approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – lies the question of hypocrisy. Even when talking to people who would happily describe themselves as pro-American (yes, a few such people still exist) it is impossible to escape the idea that Washington consistently says one thing and does another. We have remarkably little credibility in the region. This is not a problem that began with George W. Bush. It has been building for decades. Looking for a positive spin? Think of it this way: the list of American sins – real, imagined and rumored – against virtually everyone in the region is so long that it is a testament to America's overwhelming power that anyone is still willing to deal with us at all.

We are very much on record favoring real elections, democratic choice and an end to human rights abuses. Yet we have had little to say about recent crackdowns on dissent in Bahrain. Could this have something to do with the heavy use the US Navy makes of facilities at Mina Salman, Bahrain's main port?

We want governments across the region to ease restrictions on the media, a free press being a necessary ingredient of democracy. Yet both the president and the secretary of state have personally asked the Emir of Qatar to rein in Doha-based Al-Jazeera following what they perceived as unfair criticism. To his credit the emir told Bush and Powell the same thing he tells fellow Arab leaders when they complain about the channel: live with it. The government of Qatar does not tell Al-Jazeera what to report.

We have a tolerant view of Islam, which we don't see as an enemy. Yet when Vice President Cheney's daughter, who was then a deputy assistant secretary of state, visited Amman and wanted to meet with women activists her advance people told the US embassy Ms Cheney wanted no women wearing Islamic headscarves present at the session (this incident has been described to me separately by both Jordanians and Americans involved).

Next month Palestinians and (with a lot of luck) Iraqis will go to the polls. The United States says it is in favor of democratic reform in the Arab world. Will it deal with whoever wins those elections? Will it have sufficient tact and self-control to avoid manipulating the process? Any rational, long-term, view of our national self-interest screams 'yes'. Any honest analysis of our behavior over the last 30 or 40 years leaves much room for doubt.