
[The symptoms of oil withdrawal](#)

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It has become fashionable in Washington to declare that the United States must end its "addiction" -- as President Bush put it in his latest State of the Union speech -- to foreign oil. Advocates of energy independence argue that U.S. dollars are propping up oppressive regimes in the Middle East, fomenting the rise of radical fundamentalism. Reducing our demand for oil, they say, will suck these "petrocracies" dry, paving the way for democracy.

But we shouldn't be so smug about the foreign policy consequences of energy independence. Though the domestic benefits of an alternative energy policy are clear, it is likely that breaking free from Middle Eastern oil will intensify, not reduce, the national security threats facing the United States.

Rosy scenarios that long for the demise of "petrocracy" rest on shaky ground. Consider what would happen in the Middle East if Americans drastically reduced their spending on foreign oil. Other gas guzzlers would almost certainly take the place of the United States as the region's most important trading and strategic partner. China is already taking on this role with relish, and oil producers are welcoming it with open arms. In Saudi Arabia, the red carpet was rolled out for Chinese President Hu the very next day after he was treated like a second-class citizen by the Bush administration. It is hard to believe that democracy will prevail in a world in which the Saudis are in bed with the Chinese instead of the Cheneys. It goes without saying that the United States would lose much of its influence and leverage in the region.

On the other hand, if the current regimes were successfully starved of their much coveted petrodollars, the Middle East could become a region of weak, failing and failed states, akin to parts of Africa that have all but been abandoned by the international community. If we were to pull the rug out from under the ruling regimes, who would support the restless populations accustomed to a social-safety net derived from oil? Democratic experiments in the Gaza Strip and Afghanistan provide sobering illustrations of what democracy looks like without the resources to support it. Nature may abhor a vacuum, but terrorists, sex traders and drug pushers certainly don't.

If this governance void is filled at all, it would likely be by religious institutions. If nothing else, Iraq has taught us that Jeffersonian democracy is not what is hiding beneath the heavy hand of oppression in the Middle East. Instead, in countries where political organizations have been crushed by repressive regimes, it is religious association that thrives.

Across the Muslim world, the mosque serves as both the nexus of civil society and the parallel

provider of public services. We have seen from Senegal to Pakistan that religious affiliations define group identity in the absence of other civic institutions.

If democracy actually replaced today's ruling regimes, political Islamists would almost certainly be successful in early elections, echoing the recent victories of Hamas in the occupied territories and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. And that's the bright side of the coin. If petrodollars no longer held up the regimes that rule the Middle East, we might see theocracy taking root rather than democracy.

Blinkered by American exceptionalism and democratic idealism, the foreign policy debate about energy independence lacks a pragmatic assessment of what would happen in the Middle East if oil was no longer a hot commodity in the United States. We should, of course, strive for an alternative energy policy. But it is wishful thinking to do so on the grounds that it will happily coincide with an end to repression and the flourishing of democracy.

If the American government is bold enough to initiate a sweeping new energy policy, it ought to be smart enough to prepare for the security threats that will arise out of a significantly poorer and more unstable Middle East.

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