

American Democracy Promotion In The Arabian Gulf

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Abstract: *Advanced democracies, including the United States, have been championing democratic promotion around the world. In the past, American policy towards the Arab Middle East, however, had been mainly based on just paying lip-service to democracy sans concrete measures for promoting a democratic culture in the region. The events of 9/11 marked a watershed in the history of US foreign policy towards the region. Facing calls for a democratic Arab World from home and abroad in the wake of 9/11 the US government raised the ante for pushing democracy in the Arab Middle East. The rhetoric and emphasis laid on 'democracy in the Arab World' by the American leadership over the years after 9/11 was unprecedented. This study deals with the visible shift in US foreign policy vis-à-vis democracy in the region, focusing on the six GCC states, namely Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. In addition to American approach and strategy, practical measures taken in the areas of politics, economy, education, media, civil society, and human rights is also furnished. An effort is made to understand and highlight the methods and tools employed by the foreign democracy promoters, both at the levels of state and society. However, a large part of the study appertains to the activities conducted at the grass-roots level. The study is comparative in its nature, based on empirical analysis.*

Keywords: Democracy promotion, media, civil society, human rights, democratic values

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Introduction

After having observed recent revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya questions arise in one's mind about the future of democracy and authoritarianism in the oil-rich Arabian Gulf region. At a time when the argument of 'Arab Exceptionalism' is dying its death at the hands of mass revolutionary movements largely based on and inspired by democratic ideals of liberty, freedom, and human rights, is there still something 'exceptional' in the Arabian Gulf? Whether the international community is interested in democratization of the Gulf States? What is the American role therein? What did the United States do in this region for the sake of spreading democratic norms and values after pronouncing its large-scale policy of 'democracy in the Middle East' after the occurrences of 9/11? This study endeavors to answer the last question with a focus on the part played by the Bush Administration in introducing and spreading democratic values in the six GCC states.

The notion of promoting democracy has been a defining factor of the U.S. national interest throughout the twentieth century. As one of the basic values and interests it has been dominating much of American foreign policy. American imperialists and annexationists have been facing the argument that an American Empire means depriving the foreign people of democracy and it will extinguish democracy in the United States as well.¹ John F. Kennedy maintained in 1962 that American nation was commissioned by history to be either an observer of freedom's failure or the cause of its success. Ronald Reagan stressed that "we in this country, in this generation, are, by destiny rather than choice, the watchmen on the walls of world freedom."² Carter also emphasized on democracy and human rights in international forums. Wilson wanted to make the world safe for democracy. Neoconservatives ridiculed him for his stress on democracy and human rights.³ In fact, Wilsonian idealism and the logic of *realpolitik* have been contending against each other in the United States. U.S. policy of supporting democratization in other countries, however, experienced a major shift in 1974.⁴

During the Cold War Americans emphasized on protecting the democratic or non-communist nations from becoming a victim of "the beast of communism." The Americans continued to worry about democracy both at home and abroad. Truman asserted that "it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures."⁵ During the Cold War, even in the 1990s, the U.S. governments as well as foundations generally avoided talking about democracy in the Middle East.⁶ But at the same time, it has been noted that the U.S. policy has not been always opposing democratic currents in the Middle East. After all, democratic Turkey and Israel have been close allies of the United States, the argument runs.⁷

Democracy promotion in the U.S. foreign policy became more important after the Cold War. Before going to war for liberating Kuwait from Iraqi occupation, George Bush said that the defense of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia would benefit democracy directly. Democracy and self-determination were also behind the 'new world order.'⁸ In his authored book *Between Hope and History*, Clinton writes that he "wanted an America that stays secure by remaining the strongest force for peace, freedom, and prosperity in the world."⁹ Under the Clinton Administration, democratic policy of the United States was focused more on promoting 'democratic culture' and less on 'institutional reforms'.¹⁰ Before Clinton, civil society, pluralistic culture, and elections were equally under focus. Under Clinton's policy of 'democratic enlargement', the U.S. government established the Interagency Working Group on Democracy.¹¹ But, the Clinton Administration remained cautious while engaging democratic forces in the Middle East.¹² Although, his Administration supported political rights of women in the Gulf countries of Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman, it behaved differently with reference to Saudi Arabia. The analysts explain this behavior in terms of (a) U.S. national interests related to stability in the Middle East, (b) security

of the United States, (c) keeping the oil prices low, and (d) allowing American aircrafts on part of Saudi Arabia to use its air bases, etc.¹³

Not only the oil prices, but also other oil-related issues—including, ensuring continued production and supply of the oil to the United States and the West, and not allowing any of the regional countries to acquire an overwhelming domination of the oil producing region—have been the fundamental concerns of the successive U.S. Administrations over the past decades in this region.¹⁴ Every other U.S. national interest in the oil producing countries remained secondary, including the democratic ideal. Not only the Western governments but also the MNCs maintained close relationships with the autocrats in this region.¹⁵ Some of the U.S. Administrations, including that of Reagan had interests in addition to oil, like trade benefits or using Saudi Arabia to check the influence of Iran and Communist Soviet Union.¹⁶ These have been, in fact, the primary concerns of the United States causing a sort of negligence towards the country's long-pronounced policy of supporting democracy and freedom in the Arab Middle East. Though, at times, the U.S. governments, issued statements in support of political participation in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Queen Noor describes how the oil concerns of the United States and British contributed to the First Gulf War in the wake of Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. She writes:

Margaret Thatcher...was at a conference in Aspen, Colorado, on August 2, the day of the Iraqi invasion, and when George Bush arrived there the next day she told him in no uncertain terms that if Western forces did not stop Saddam Hussein he would roll his tanks not only into Saudi Arabia, but also into Bahrain and Dubai, and end up controlling 65 percent of the world's oil reserves.¹⁷

While explaining the factors behind the persistence of authoritarianism in the region under study even the observers and analysts seem to be somewhat surprised on the attitude of the Western powers including the United States. No effort was spared by the western powers regarding democracy in the ex-communist states, but they had a totally different set of priorities in the Arab world.¹⁸ According to a 1993 publication, Saudi police attacked a western diplomat's house during a party and misbehaved to the ladies and gentlemen, violating the privacy of the families. But none from the west, including the western media, made any protests on it. The victims' reaction was "diplomatically hushed."¹⁹

After the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait, there were demands of democratization of the Gulf States and some questioned the logic of reinstatement of the autocratic Sabah regime.²⁰ But almost nothing substantial took place except a few tinkering measures like introduction of a Basic Law of Saudi Arabia in 1992 that is sometimes referred to as the first constitutional document of the country.

Experts and writers had been urging the U.S. governments since long for a consistent democratization policy towards the Arab world. However, it was the events of September 11, 2001 that pushed the world into a totally new situation where the concepts of peace, security, and stability in the world, in general, and in the United States and the Middle East, in particular, changed to a large extent. In this new situation, pressure on the United States, hence on the Bush Administration, for pushing democracy in the Arab world was unprecedented.²¹ The president and his administration did realize the pressure and utmost need of a mega shift in the policy and of taking steps in this regard.²²

The Bush Administration and 9/11

In the wake of 9/11, Democracy promotion became the foundation of the Bush Administration's foreign policy towards the Arab countries. Freedom Agenda launched by the Bush Administration marked a major policy shift. By some, the shift was seen as "a blanket repudiation of six decades of American foreign policy." Traditionally, the U.S. governments had been buying stability arguments and embracing autocratic authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, including the Gulf countries. By embracing the policy, the Administration in fact rejected the arguments based on Middle Eastern exceptionalism or Arab exceptionalism. The Bush Administration linked the policy of promoting freedom in the Arab world to American security. The shocks of 9/11 had forced the Administration to revisit its security policy. The Bush Administration made use of four types of institutions to proceed with its democratic promotion in the Gulf countries: (a) its own governmental departments and their subsidiary organizations, (b) private American organizations (under public-private partnerships), (c) international institutions of whom the United States itself is a part or member like BMENA and American-Kuwait Alliance, and (d) local organizations from the Gulf. Among the international institutions were bilateral as well as multilateral.

Democracy promoting structures were redesigned. Three major initiatives were launched in order to implement the Freedom Agenda: (i) the Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA), (ii) the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA), and (iii) democracy assistance programs. MEFTA's and BMENA's core program focus was on economic reform whereas democracy assistance programs run by MEPI, DRL, and USAID also focused on political and education reform and women's empowerment. In the Gulf region, MEPI and DRL were engaged but USAID was not much active in the region. Funds available for democratic promotion were increased. HRDF, for example, was provided 48 million U.S. dollars in fiscal year 2005 compared to only 13 million U.S. dollars in fiscal year 2001. Twenty-two (22) percent of the amount was provided to National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a private, non-profit organization.²⁵

Under the Clinton Administration, little more than five million U.S. dollars were provided for political aid for the entire Middle East. Though, there were other bilateral fundings but the amounts were modest.²⁴ During 2002, the two bureaus—the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, and the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor—committed 29 million U.S. dollars for the cause of democracy promotion in the Middle East.²⁵ For 2003-4, MEPI allocated 143 million U.S. dollars for the Middle East. Thirty-five million U.S. dollars from the amount were earmarked for democracy aid.²⁶

Exchange programs and activities were conducted in many areas and sectors. For the sake of analysis, general exchanges are discussed under the subheading 'awareness campaign', educational, cultural, and business exchanges under 'political, economic, and education sectors'.

Approach and Strategy

Looking at the history of democratization in different parts of the world and the American role therein, we come to know that for bringing political awareness among the masses, overt propaganda campaigns were launched. The United States financed a number of radio stations, like Radios Free Europe, Asia, Iraq, Iran, and Radio Marti in Cuba. Political oppositions and exiled dissidents were provided financial support.²⁷ Though, radio channels targeting the Gulf region were launched under the Bush Administration, its approach towards democracy promotion in the Gulf countries remained covert. The approach was based on gradual change through peaceful means. Working at the grassroots level was the pivotal point. It seemed to be logical

because some of the quarters in the region have been arguing that democracy imposed from outside will not work in the Middle East as the people will be apprehensive about it. 'It will work only if it emerges from within because the people, in this case, will own it,' ran the argument. Ground realities also favored the gradualist and peaceful approach, while the United States was already engaged in two international wars in Afghanistan and Iraq beginning in 2001 and 2003 respectively. Starting more wars would be unrealistic, if not impossible. Furthermore, the regimes in the Gulf are friendly to the United States, unlike the hostile regimes of Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam in Iraq. Regimes in the Gulf do not directly cause any serious problems to the United States and the oil continues to flow from the Gulf to the United States without any stoppages. In contrast, the regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq proved to be thorns in the American throat every now and then.

Removing the two regimes by using force was necessary in order 'to ensure American security,' and 'to liberate the people, from repressive regimes.' Coercive actions were taken and elected regimes installed in Iraq and Afghanistan. We are not assuming, however, that the motive of Afghan and Iraq invasions was democracy promotion. In the Gulf, the incumbent regimes were persuaded through diplomatic endeavors, trade benefits and conditionalities. They were asked to introduce reforms in political as well as economic spheres in order to open up the system and to make it a participatory and a representative one. The Administration worked with the governments of the Gulf region at bilateral level to achieve the democracy objectives. Coordinated diplomacy was one of the main channels of promoting the democratic cause in the region.²⁸ The Administration also employed the concept of public private partnership in order to increase the efficacy of its programs and projects. MENA Businesswomen's Network and Vital Voices are the best examples of such partnerships. American NGOs were encouraged to partner with local reformers in the region. Individuals working in the fields of human rights and making demands for reforms in the region were also supported.

Soft power tools of 'persuasion, and 'shaming' were employed by the Administration. These tools had been also used in Central and Eastern Europe to introduce and strengthen democracy. The Administration also used civic education and propaganda strategies. The tools used included exchange programs, public diplomacy, training programs, funds and conditionalities. Conditionalities for political reform were attached to the proposal for Middle East Free Trade Zone and to global U.S. aid with reference to governance based on justice and other related issues when the aid was increased by 50 percent in 2002.²⁹

Departments, Programs, and Initiatives Involved

The State Department played the most significant role at both levels—policy formulation and policy implementation. The Congress approved funds along with providing legal instruments and formulating policy. Furthermore, the Congress kept an eye on the program on the front of policy implementation. The Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, and the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor of the State Department were responsible for the policy implementation. The Congress approved policies and funds for The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) and the Human Rights and Democracy Fund (HRDF).³⁰ Human Rights and Democracy Fund (HRDF) finances Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) of the State Department. Middle East Partnership Initiative is funded from Economic Support Fund. DRL is also a source of financial support to National Endowment for Democracy (NED).³¹ The Congress also provided the required legal instruments. Advance Democracy Act of 2007 and the 9/11 Commission International Implementation Act of 2007, for example, are among such legal instruments. The act encourages and assists the government of Saudi Arabia to introduce reforms in various sectors. Under this act, the U.S. government provides financial support to the governments that reform

educational systems of their countries. The following extract from the act illustrates how the role played by the Congress in the process of democracy promotion is significant.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has...a lack of political outlets for its citizens, that poses a threat to the security of the United States, the international community, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia itself. ... It is the sense of Congress that, in order to more effectively combat terrorism, the Government of Saudi Arabia must undertake and continue a number of political and economic reforms, including...providing more political rights to its citizens, increasing the rights of women, engaging in comprehensive educational reform. ...the policies of the United States shall be to support the efforts of the Government of Saudi Arabia to make political, economic, and social reforms throughout the country.

It is important to note that at least fourteen programs and initiatives were launched by the Bush Administration during 2000 and 2008 (*see* the following Table). These programs contributed to the democratic promotion in one way or the other.

Table: Organizations, Projects and Initiatives Launched during 2000–2008

Organization/Initiative	Year of Creation
1. Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Businesswomen's Network	2006
2. Foundation for the Future	2005
3. Fund for the Future	2005
4. American-Kuwaiti Alliance (AKA)	2003
5. The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)	2002
6. Forum for the Future	2005
7. Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA)	2004
8. MEPI Alumni Network	2002
9. Bahrain Forum for Public-Private Partnership	2007
10. U.S.-Saudi Arabian Strategic Dialogue (SUSRIS)	2005
11. Radio Sawa	2002

12.	Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA)	2003
13.	Office of Global Communication	2002
14.	U.S.-Saudi Arabian Strategic Dialogue	2005

Awareness Campaign and Diplomatic Front

The importance of awareness campaign to serve the cause of democracy promotion cannot be overemphasized. Awareness campaign for the purpose of democratization may include a wide variety of things. In order to bring awareness, the Bush Administration launched propaganda campaigns, organized trips, tours, and exchanges to increase people-to-people contacts between the Americans and the Arabs from the Gulf. Conferences, video conferences, seminars, group discussions, debates, dialogues, and fora were also held. Such events were held within the Gulf region and without. The events were also participated by people from democratic countries other than America. Large number of people from the Gulf had the opportunity to listen to and talk about democracy, human rights, women empowerment, and reforms.

One of the key areas MEPI works on is encouraging engagement between youth from Arab and democratic countries. MEPI programs had a public diplomacy agenda. Some of its programs brought participants from the Arab countries in contact with Americans. Sometimes, Arabs were invited to America by the MEPI for the sake of interactions as a part of the reform promotion agenda. In 2008, at the occasion of the Fifth Forum for the Future in Dubai, themes like the slow pace of democratic reform and the need to engage the youth in civil society organizations were discussed. At the first regional summit of the MEPI Alumni Network, 16 panels discussed how to expand civic activism in various spheres of life. Some of the panels examined issues related to governmental institutions, electoral systems, free media, and education. Some others talked about women empowerment and issues related to legal restrictions on NGOs. Among the discussed questions were how to empower entrepreneurs and how to promote public-private partnership.

A special radio station, Radio Sawa, was established for the Middle East. Radio Sawa is also broadcast live on the internet. The website has a separate transmission for the Gulf. Political freedoms and religious and ethnic tolerance were among the topics discussed at different fora. In 2004, annual conference of the National Union of Kuwaiti Students (NUKS) was sponsored by American-Kuwaiti Alliance. Six American Corners housed in Omanese universities proved to be centers of activities designed to promote democratic awareness in the country. Democracy Video Challenge was launched by the Department of State in collaboration with its partners³² on the International Democracy Day—September 15, 2008. The Challenge was launched online asking young video-makers to complete the phrase, “Democracy is...” through three-minute videos. More than 900 people from 95 countries submitted their videos. Young video makers from the Gulf countries also participated in the competition.

The United States ambassador to Kuwait and his colleagues made frequent visits to *diwaniyas* (evening political salons) and talked about how to develop democracy in the country. On the occasion of election campaign in 2008 in the United States, American diplomats in the United Arab Emirates conducted a wide range of activities like debates, video conferences, seminars and other outreach programs. The purpose of this campaign was to place emphasis on the worth of electoral democracy. Debates were organized among the students from universities and high schools on the topics related to democracy. Video conferences were organized for

journalists along with students. The participants had interactions with the speakers and panelists in the United States. The seminars were focused on topics like women role in politics and civic participation. American embassy in the United Arab Emirates asked the government for expanding the electorate for the Federal National Council which selects 50 percent of its 40 members. It asked the government for empowering the council and introducing universal franchise.

Political, Economic and Education Sectors

The Bush Administration relied on a covert policy of gradual change and did not threaten the authoritarian regimes in the Gulf. Political reform gained more and more importance in terms of fund allocation. Over the years, MEPI allocated funds reflecting this pattern.³³ In the areas of electoral politics and parliamentary support, programs to enhance the institutional capacity of the consultative bodies were funded by the United States and members of the *Majlis al-Shuras* were provided training and technical assistance. An NGO funded by the United States arranged a training program for parliamentarians and political societies in Bahrain. For the sake of strengthening parliamentary politics, U.S.-funded implementing partners trained the members and administrative staffs of the Central Municipal Council and the Advisory Council in Qatar and the members and staff of *Majlis al-Shura* in Oman. In United Arab Emirates, the American officials kept on persuading the government for broader elections for municipalities, student councils, and the Federal National Council (FNC). Some of the Bahraini parliamentarians were invited by the U.S. government for having consultations with the Congress and the state legislatures. To introduce latest voting technologies and make local election officials familiar with polling procedures a program was arranged in Bahrain. The purpose was to ensure transparency in electoral process. Members of *Majlis al-Shura* of Oman were engaged with public on issues related to environment through a funded program. American officials in Qatar engaged prospective candidates in roundtable discussions. Permanent Election Committee of Qatar was provided assistance through an implementing partner at the occasion of third election for the Central Municipal Council in 2007. The objective was training the candidates and increasing the awareness among the voters. Prior to 2008 elections in Kuwait, a program was funded to educate voters. The candidates were provided assistance for planning and developing electoral campaigns.

Since the elections coincided with the elections in the United States, the U.S. officials in Kuwait carried out a number of activities. At two universities, video conferences were arranged between Kuwaiti students and American academics. Elections in the two countries were discussed in detail in these conferences. A series of lectures for Kuwaiti students was conducted in Arabic. Members of the 178 municipal councils in Saudi Arabia were trained and were provided technical assistance through programs financed by the United States. Similar programs provided assistance to labor unions in Oman. One of such programs was designed to familiarize union leaders with international best practices with regard to electoral processes.

Exchange programs in almost all six countries were arranged. One of these programs was offered to election officials in Qatar to familiarize them with the American electoral system. Another exchange program was offered to Qatari lawyers to make them aware of the democratic legal systems in America. In Bahrain, programs were funded for promoting rule of law and political participation. Collaborations were made with Bahraini NGOs and journalists were trained on issues related to democracy, elections, and parliament.

In the economic sphere, activities like trade missions, business exchanges and meetings were arranged between the American and Arab business communities. Entrepreneurial trainings were organized and technical help was provided. The FTAs signed with Oman and Bahrain and TIFA agreement with the United Arab Emirates carry a potential of facilitating the economic

reforms required for the foundations of building democratic societies in these countries. The FTAs have provisions on areas like governance, transparency, and labor standards.³⁴

In the education sector, student discussion groups were formed, scholarships were offered, training programs were launched, and student exchanges were coordinated. Public sector universities offered degree and certificate programs. Co-educational studies were made possible. Efforts to reform the curricula were made. Virtual clubs were formed. Among the tasks, assigned to MEPI, was also providing new materials for improving curricula and civic education. Story books were translated into Arabic for classroom libraries under programs run by the MEPI.³⁵ American Corners, functioning in different parts of the Gulf, worked as community-based information and outreach centers. In 2007, USAID through its Office of Middle East Programs (OMEP) funded MENA Peace Scholarship Program for nine Arab countries including Oman from the Gulf. Micro-scholarships were awarded to 75 high school students from Kuwait on yearly basis for English-language programs. Community service projects and in-class elections were made components of the language programs. The purpose of these components was to inculcate the value of civic participation and democratic spirit in the students. In 2007, around 200 high school students from Kuwait availed the micro-scholarships. In the same year, under an exchange and study program, 16 high school students from Kuwait were sent to the United States who stayed there for one year.

In February 2008, high school students in Kuwait were trained by an American cultural envoy in writing and performing plays intended to impart political awareness. An award-winning female recording artist was invited to Kuwait on a visit by the U.S. officials in 2008. She trained high school girls on how to dramatize their problems and issues related to discrimination against various social groups. A partner group shared technical expertise with the Supreme Education Council of Qatar to implement a program in middle schools for legal and civic education and improvement of curriculum. In collaboration with the UAE Academy, University of Washington (UW), a public-sector American university, offered certificate programs in Abu Dhabi. Young job seekers were the main target. Quite interestingly, among the participants, females were more than 80 percent. It was a rare opportunity for the females to be part of such programs at graduate level and learn in an open environment. Despite the fact that females are much more in higher education institutions than their male counterparts, they have far lesser opportunities of visiting abroad or studying in western universities. In these circumstances, the initiatives of this sort were seen as helpful in popularizing liberal values and culture among the people. The classes and sessions had a liberal environment. A co-educational environment provided them the rare opportunity to interact with opposite sexes without unnecessary restrictions. Furthermore, the curricula and the content were same as taught at the University of Washington's main campus in Seattle. A part of the faculty members was also from the University of Washington. The concepts of teamwork and critical thinking are not generally emphasized in educational institutions in the Emirates. The University of Washington's programs put a greater emphasis on inculcating the two values among the students. Undergraduate and graduate degree programs were launched in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, by Michigan State University (MSU), another public-sector American university. Students from Bahrain, Oman, and Saudi Arabia were provided opportunities to visit and join American universities. Student council elections were facilitated at local universities.

Civil Society, Human Rights and Media

'Human rights' is an area that is flawed the most in the Gulf region. Severe human rights violations continue till today. American diplomats in Saudi Arabia held meetings with the National Society for Human Rights and the Human Rights Commission. Saudi Arabian military was provided training and was educated on international norms of human rights. Members of the

civil society and the government of Saudi Arabia were sponsored under International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) in 2008 where they attended seminars highlighting issues like human rights, rule of law, and participatory democracy.

Human trafficking is the most important area when we talk about human rights violations in the Gulf. American embassies in the Gulf countries made contacts and cooperated with the labor-sending countries, and made efforts to check human trafficking in the region. They also facilitated contacts between foreign workers in Qatar and NGOs in the sending countries. For drafting the anti-trafficking law, the U.S. government provided an expert to Oman for guidance and expert advice and the law was passed in 2008. Labor inspectors in Oman were trained in detecting incidents of human trafficking. American diplomats in Bahrain showed films highlighting the problem of trafficking. For effective implementation of anti-human trafficking laws, judges, lawyers as well as law enforcement officials were trained. Programs were implemented for capacity building and enforcing worker rights in Bahrain. U.S officials in the country also created an online forum for bringing awareness on the status of foreign workers. In 2008, U.S. ambassador to Kuwait held a meeting with the Deputy Prime Minister and talked about the deportation of demonstrating Bangladeshi workers.

In most of the Gulf countries, civil society organizations are not permitted under law. In other cases, where they exist, function under severe legal restrictions. Like political reform, the civil society sector gained more attention of the MEPI over time. Support was provided for a project to reform the civil society law in order to lessen the gap between the government and civil society in Bahrain. In January 2008, 56 teachers were trained in the country under an American-funded civic-education program. Small grants were provided for strengthening NGOs in Kuwait. The U.S. embassy in Kuwait initiated a series of bimonthly informal meetings in 2007. The meetings were attended by individuals from NGOs and diplomats. U.S. ambassador in Oman encouraged reformers and civil society activists by inviting them from time to time to the embassy events. The American officials in Qatar also held informal roundtable discussions and emphasized the value of civic participation. Exchange programs for Qatari civil activists and potential NGO leaders were sponsored. U.S. speaker programs were hosted jointly by the United States and local civil society organizations in Saudi Arabia to encourage civil society development. Allocation of U.S. democracy funds to civil society was one third in 1997. By 2002, it had increased to 48 percent.³⁶

Like other sectors, media does not enjoy freedom in the Gulf. Freedom of expression is severely compromised. In most of the Gulf countries, discussing politics or criticizing the hereditary regimes is not allowed. Media organizations and journalists practice self-censorship. To promote independence of media and freedom of expression in the Gulf, the American government provided financial and technical support to journalists and media associations. Training programs and media exchange programs were also arranged and scholarships were offered. Some of the training programs were organized by the MEPI. Some of the governments in the Gulf censor internet websites. Global Online Freedom Act (H.R. 275) for enhancing freedom of expression on the internet, passed in 2007, is a key tool to address the issue in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. It asks American businesses not to deal with the countries where governments censor internet. In 2007, Kuwait Journalists Association (KJA) was provided funds for drafting an amendment to the press law. Under a grant, journalists, and editors from Kuwait were trained on the production of television announcements for public service in 2007. In 2008, U.S. ambassador to Kuwait hosted roundtables for local journalists throughout the year. For training journalists on reporting on elections, two programs were financed by the American government in Qatar in 2007. Hosts of radio and television talk shows from Saudi Arabia were engaged when a media exchange program was launched in March 2008 for sharpening professional skills and promoting democratic values. The U.S. government provided funds for training journalists from Bahrain on the problem of human trafficking. The American embassy in the United Arab Emirates facilitated cooperation between media law experts from America and

journalists from the United Arab Emirates when the later needed help in proposing draft amendments to the press law in 2006.

Conclusion

Previously the Americans did not see authoritarianism in the Middle East as something directly harmful to American security. But, after the unpleasant incidents a new reality opened on the Americans that democracy and freedom in the Middle East is essential for American security and that authoritarian regimes Middle Eastern regimes breed anti-Americanism. So, an active American role in democratization of the Middle East was seen as unavoidable by the US foreign policymakers. As we saw, a variety of activities—from launching awareness campaigns to conducting training workshops and offering scholarships etcetera—were carried out by the Americans in the region under the policy of ‘democratizing the Arab world.’ US foreign policy towards the region under study experienced a change in the wake of 9/11.

Recent protests on part of the Arabs in the Gulf region and demanding political reforms and democracy in their respective states show that the masses in these countries are now aware of their rights and benefits of democracy. It can be argued that the role played by the foreign democracy-promoters including the Americans might have contributed in this awakening.

Notes

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