

The Challenge of Aid

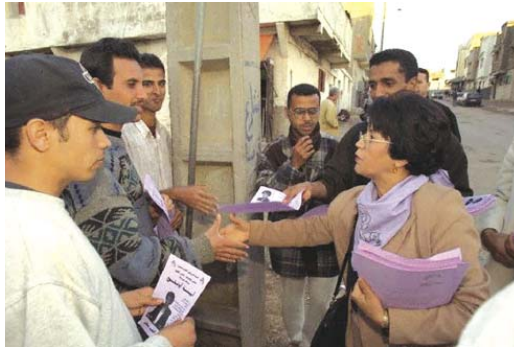
The Middle East presents democracy promoters with both an urgent and difficult problem.
The President of the National Endowment for Democracy lays out one path to reform.

by Carl Gershman

Since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, strengthening democracy in the Middle East has become a central priority not just for the United States but for the international community writ large. Before 9/11, the National Endowment for Democracy was among a small handful of organizations that supported efforts to advance democracy in the Middle East. At that time, the general tendency among both policymakers and democracy practitioners was to look the other way and to tacitly accept the doctrine of “Arab exceptionalism,” which presupposes the inability of the Arab region, alone among the major cultures of the world, to achieve democracy. While this doctrine is now generally rejected, democratic progress in the Middle East remains limited.

Democracy in the Middle East has now been placed on the international agenda, though not without resistance from regional governments who argue that this is just another attempt by Western coun-


modern economy but also to encourage the development of critical and inquisitive thinking. Reform advocates are also calling for the revision of religious education to foster the emergence of a more open culture. The second is the political system, which must be opened by allowing genuinely competitive multiparty elections. This issue is extremely controversial as it involves allocating political power and the risk that Islamist parties might use a liberal opening to advance illiberal policies. Still, the issue cannot be avoided and strategies of inclu-



Campaigning in Morocco

It is vitally important that governments in the Middle East also move forward rather than block change or make grudging concessions under pressure from within and without. They are more likely to take bold steps if the United States and its European allies are united in pressing for reform and in creating political and economic incentives for reform. In addition, Western governments will have to be decisive in defending the human rights of democracy activists in the Middle East, many of whom are now in prison or threatened with retribution if they advocate basic freedoms.

Western governments, in cooperation with their partners in the region, must also foster political conditions that will encourage democratic progress across the region. In Iraq, it will be necessary to control and stem the violence and to ensure the elections, now planned for January, will move the country toward political inclusion and a legitimate government. Similarly, progress toward an interim agreement between Israel and the Palestinians is critical, even though such progress cannot be made a precondition for reform efforts. Finally, Turkey's accession to the European Union would add to regional stability and create new incentives for Middle Eastern countries to deepen their relationships with democratic ones.

Many important initiatives are now underway to promote political reform in the Middle East. The United States and Europe have launched both bilateral and multilateral efforts, such as the G-8's new Forum for the Future, which includes both Arab governments and representatives from Arab civil society. In addition, there are many initiatives underway at the nongovernmental level (such as the Transatlantic Democracy Network) that seek to create new forms of transatlantic cooperation on this issue. No single program or initiative will be decisive, but cumulatively these efforts have the chance of helping the countries of the Middle East turn the corner toward democracy and modernity. Nothing could do more to advance peace in the post-9/11 world. 

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tries, chiefly the United States, to impose an alien system. Increasingly, though, a different voice is being heard within the region. Arabs are advocating for fundamental democratic change with a new sense of urgency, as evidenced by the work of Arab intellectuals in the UNDP's Arab Human Development Reports and in declarations issued by gatherings in Sana'a, Alexandria, Doha and elsewhere.

A broad agenda for economic modernization and social and legal reform is gradually taking shape, but two sensitive areas within this agenda require special attention from donors. The first is the educational system, which must be refashioned not only to teach new technical skills needed in the

The implementation of this extraordinarily ambitious agenda will require the collective efforts of many actors, both governmental and nongovernmental. Nongovernmental activists and practitioners will have to take the lead in drafting the agenda, mobilizing support and developing grassroots education to foster a new consciousness of engaged citizenship. In doing so, they will need financial, technical and moral support from the United States and other democratic countries, delivered primarily through nongovernmental counterpart institutions such as the NED and its party, labor and business institutes, as well as through the growing number of democracy foundations in Western and Central Europe.

sion will need to be developed, possibly starting with local and parliamentary elections.