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HOW THE ARAB REGIMES DEFEATED THE LIBERALIZATION CHALLENGE

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This article examines democratization efforts in the Arab world and how governments neutralized, utilized, or adjusted to them. The reactions of Islamists and the liberal movements themselves are also examined. In general, the regimes were able to defeat the demands for reform by using a number of classical techniques and new adaptations.

In recent years, from within and without, Arab regimes have faced a democracy challenge. Originally, this arose from a domestic challenge by reform-minded groups that were frustrated by the shortcomings of their countries' governments. It became increasingly clear that the numerous failures of Arab rulers over many years were not being addressed by changes. Arab states were increasingly falling further behind others in the world in terms of living standards, the level of rights, the treatment of women, responsiveness to rapid changes in the world, and other areas.[1]

This effort was joined and reinforced by Western policies—especially by the U.S. government. Finally, around 2004, Islamist groups also began to take up the demand for more civic rights and freer elections. By 2006, however, the impetus toward democracy—at least as a high-profile agenda theme—began to fade. One reason for this was the relative success of Islamist groups in using the issue for their own purposes. However, paramount was the way in which the incumbent Arab regimes dealt with the question.

Yet the region has now entered a new era characterized by the following points: a rise in radical Islamist movements, though the Arab nationalist regimes are still holding onto power and might well not lose it; growing hatred of the United States and Israel, at least compared to the levels in some places during the 1990s; the belief that total victory can be achieved through terrorism and other violent tactics; euphoric expectation of imminent revolution, glorious victories, and unprecedented Arab or Muslim unity; a disinterest in diplomatic compromise solutions as unnecessary and even treasonous—to concede nothing is to lose nothing because you still have the claim to all you want and have thus left open an opportunity to gain everything; and the death of hope for democracy due to both regime manipulation and radical Islamist exploitation of the opportunities offered by some openings in the system. The only real difference between the new and the old concepts is that what was formally expressed in Arab nationalist terms is now stated in Islamist, or at least more Islamic, ones. The idea is that Islamism can succeed where Arab nationalism failed. Yet aside from the obvious difference in the content of the two ideologies, their basic perceptions and goals are quite parallel. They both believe that the Arab/Muslim world faces a U.S.-Israel (or Western-Israel) or Zionist-Crusader conspiracy to destroy it; a secondary enemy is the majority of Arab rulers whose relative moderation shows them to be traitors. Only those who preach intransigence and struggle are upholders of proper Arab and Muslim values. In the 1950s and 1960s, this distinction pitted Egypt, Syria, and Iraq as the progressive states against "reactionary" Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and other monarchies. Today, it is Iran and Syria against Egypt,

Jordan, and Saudi Arabia; since this enemy is purely evil, there can be no compromise with it. By the same token, more or less all types of violence are justified. This cannot be terrorism because the violence is defensive, responsive, necessary, and against a satanic foe; total victory is achievable and therefore anything less is treasonous. Consequently, the people must unite under governments with the proper ideologies and that are able to mobilize the entire society—that is, a dictatorship that will destroy Israel, expel Western influence, and bring rapid development without sacrificing traditional identity, thus creating a just, even utopian, society.

In contrast, the idea of liberalism and reform is essentially a trick of the enemy. As this is all so necessary and workable, anything other than struggle and resistance—more citizen rights, reform, modernized economic structures, and the like—is a distraction. Only after total victory is achieved can these luxuries be managed. Thus, while Islamists and Arab nationalists compete for power, sometimes even violently, they mutually reinforce the intellectual system and worldview that locks the Arab world into the very problems they purport to remedy. If the priority is on resistance, reform is at best a distraction, and at worst it is treason.

"In a state of war," wrote the Egyptian playwright Ali Salem, whose works are banned in his own country, "No one argues... or asks questions." They are told that this is not the right time to talk about free speech, democracy, or corruption, and then ordered, "Get back to the trench immediately!"

When in March 2001, Ba'th party members asked Syrian Vice President Khaddam at a public meeting why the regime did not do more to solve the problems of corruption, incompetence, and the slow pace of reform, his answer was that the Arab-Israeli conflict permitted no changes at home: "This country is in a state of war as long as the occupation continues." The irony of this argument is that the regime had turned down Israel's offer to return the entire Golan Heights a year earlier.

THE FATE OF THE DEMOCRATIZATION PROJECT

This paper analyzes how Arab regimes have dealt with the democracy challenge. They usually neutralized it by using a multilayered response that included repression, redefinition, and cooption. In some cases—which deserve more attention than they have received to date—governments even made some actual domestic changes. Clearly, every country managed the issue in different ways.

What is most significant, however, is not that the democracy project was largely a failed effort but rather that the way regimes responded to this challenge is defining how Arab governance will work in the coming decades. Assessing whether Arab regimes will become weaker and more unstable due to this reaction and how such efforts have affected the relative chances of competing forces in the future is extremely important.

Among the main responses, with the balance different in each country, are: a reassertion of a traditional agenda; the delegitimization of opponents; repression and harassment; pretense and cooption; and finally, actual reforms. Both liberal and Islamist opposition have adjusted to this process, and their strategies will also be examined.

Punishing dissidents is the most obvious way of silencing the democratic and liberal forces. It should be emphasized, however, that this is only one tool in the regimes' repertoire. Taken alone, it would be far less effective than a broader strategy composed of a wide range of instruments. Such a strategy would include the mobilization of the masses around a positive program that promised them success, though the victory might be one of feeling better rather than material improvement of their lives; an alternative interpretation of the facts so as to suggest that reform or democracy would be damaging; the harnessing of nationalist and religious sentiments in the service of the regime and as enemies of reform; the discrediting of dissidents as traitors among the general population; and the

infliction of costs on dissidents, which might include death, imprisonment, torture, injury to their families, the loss of jobs and positions, forbidding them to travel abroad, making them unpopular and dishonored, or forcing them into exile. It should be remembered that for every one person punished, dozens more are intimidated by these events to stop, decrease, or redirect their activism to avoid suffering a similar fate. At the same time, for every negative treatment there is a positive one—the carrots as opposed to the sticks. People can be offered money, jobs, honors and privileges, patronage, and so on to get them either to cooperate or to keep quiet. Again, many observe such things and act as the regime prefers in order to gain these benefits for themselves. Humans are more often weak, meek, or selfish rather than heroic. The best thing of all is to appear heroic while selling out.

Another tactic employed by the regimes is to instill fear that reform or democratization brings the risk of chaos or an Islamist takeover. This is an especially effective weapon in turning people who would otherwise advocate change to cling fearfully to the status quo. It is even stronger because it has a material basis in truth, given the presence of Iraq as a vivid example. Of course, that country's instability and bloodshed is due in part to those who want it to serve precisely that purpose as opposed to being a model that encourages emulation by their own people.

Furthermore, these regimes persuade the large traditionalist and conservative bloc, often a majority of the population, that the existing government and status quo is preferable to liberalization. This is often an easy task. At the same time, by combating such changes—and posturing as combatants against the West and Israel as well as pious rulers—even those who might otherwise be radical Islamists are won over.

At the same time, the regimes can tell would-be liberals they must support their rulers against the Islamists and the would-be Islamists that they must support their rulers against the liberals. This is, of course, contradictory, but that does not prevent it from working.

In addition, the regimes sometimes pretend to be the real reformers. Governments have many ways of acting as if they are themselves the main advocates of democracy and implementers of reform. There are many ways to do so: conferences, rhetoric, promises, fixed elections, the creation of their own substitute institutions (such as state-sponsored human rights groups), and so on. These efforts are also often successful in fooling the Western media, governments, and others, or at least they give them an excuse not to take action or criticize.

Finally, of course, some regimes actually do make reforms, though often face popular opposition. The clearest examples here are Morocco, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates. Perhaps Jordan, to a lesser extent, could also be listed here.

REGIME RESPONSES[2]

The Usual Suspects

Perhaps the single most active and consistent measure among regimes was to reinforce and revitalize the existing Arab nationalist ideology, which already offered significant defenses against the democracy challenge. Basically, this view has been that the key danger facing the Arabs is Western—especially American—imperialism, Zionism, and their collaborators among the Arab rulers or intellectuals. This threat is to be countered by Arab unity in general and by solidarity around their existing, proper, leaders.

The basic argument was that given the threat of imperialism (both American and Western generally) and Zionism, democracy was not only a distracting luxury and still one more example of Western hypocrisy, but indeed even an integral part of the conspiracy against the Arabs. For example, in January 2001, Syrian Information Minister Adnan Omran proclaimed that civil society was an "American term" and that "neocolonialism no longer relies on armies." It was by using

subversion through cultural products and political ideas that the enemy was attacking.[3]

The West was said to be attacking the Arab world—sometimes used interchangeably with Islam itself—on many fronts: not only on the traditional Arab-Israeli one, but in Iraq, Lebanon, and many other places, utilizing economic, intellectual, and cultural, as well as military weapons. The response had to be that of uniting around one's own leaders, in particular the local regime. The "war on terrorism" was reinterpreted as a war on Arabism or Islam. Polls showed that these claims had a great appeal popularly, more so than did the idea of democracy or liberalization.

A second campaign was to focus directly on the revitalization of Arab nationalism, which often included its mixing with Islamism, or at least put a greater emphasis on Islam. This tactic was both to undermine the Islamist opposition and to strengthen the appeal of nationalism. A particularly powerful use of this measure was the development of the concept of "resistance," especially in Syria.

This idea was most clearly laid out in Syrian President Bashar al-Asad's speech to the Fourth General Conference of the Syrian Journalists Union on August 15, 2006.[4] It should be stressed that while his rhetoric was far more extreme than that of other Arab leaders, his basic ideas can be found throughout the Arab-speaking world in diluted form, especially in the majority of the media. It was nothing less than an alternative interpretation of the problems and solutions of the Middle East to that offered by the advocates of reform, cooperation with the West, and democratization.

According to Bashar, the Arab world's principal problem was not underdevelopment or dictatorship, but the threat to mind and spirit as well as to identity and heritage by a "systematic invasion." To make matters worse, many Arabs had betrayed their fellows through the "culture of defeat, submission, and blind drifting" that accepted the enemy's plan. To change course was tantamount to embracing extinction.

For Bashar, the democratization/moderation program was merely a cover for the "submission and humiliation and deprivation of peoples of their rights," to be killed without mercy and enslaved without appeal.[5]

"They wanted Israel to be the dominating power in the Arab region and the Arabs would be laborers, slaves, and satellites revolving in the Israeli orbit." As an example, he cited Iraq, whose "destruction and ruination" had taken the country back to the Stone Age. The same point applies to the Arab-Israeli peace process of the 1990s. Bashar's diagnosis was that the Arab mistake had been to adopt diplomacy and cancel "all the other options."[6]

Regarding the moderate Arab bargaining position, Bashar characterized that as "to offer everything to Israel" and get nothing at all. The Arab mistake, according to Bashar, was not rejecting compromise but rather not even considering that as an option. By trying "to appease Israel and the United States" they abandoned intimidation and ensured the indifference of the rest of the world. Instead of pressuring and criticizing Israel, the West demands things such as better treatment for Syrian dissidents, and the UN passes resolutions protesting massacres in Sudan. According to Bashar, this is what happened when the Arabs wasted their time "discussing and negotiating with [them]selves, convinced about a promised peace with an imaginary party that is [in fact] preparing itself for its next aggression against the Arabs."[7]

Bashar then stirred up passions quite effectively. Not only was it more heroic to fight the West and Israel while rejecting change, it was more likely to be effective. "If wisdom, according to some Arabs, means defeat and humiliation, then by the same token, victory means adventure and recklessness." His model was the Hizballah-Israel War of 2006, which not only did he proclaim to be a victory over Israel but also one over the treacherous Lebanese majority which had opposed Syrian domination. Hizballah had not only won, he claimed, but its actions had been wildly popular in the Arab world. This all proved that Arab nationalist

sentiment had not declined at all; it was not a thing of the past to be replaced by liberalism, but rather "is at its peak." If there is an unfavorable balance of power, righting it is only a matter of willpower, which will be overcome "When we decide—and the decision is in our hands—to overcome this gap."[8]

He summed up the strategy of willpower over material power in the following words: "We have decided to be weak but when we decide to be strong this balance will be changed." As for the global community, the UN Security Council, or other countries' views, it was unnecessary to take their opinions into consideration. "National decisions take precedence over any international resolution, even if this leads to fighting or war."[9]

This did not mean that other Arab regimes, or even Syria itself, were eager for war or that more moderate governments wanted a confrontation with the West. However, they did want to use this kind of rhetoric to stir up pro-government emotions. The real line of conflict did not stand, as the United States or local reformers said, between the dictatorships and their own people, but rather between all Arabs—from top to bottom—and their outside enemies.

This was an old argument whose effectiveness had appeared to decline in past decades. Nevertheless, it did continue to be spectacularly successful in shaping perceptions and mobilizing loyalties. The result was overwhelming opposition to the alternative, democracy-oriented, program. It should be noted that Islamists, even those who opposed the existing regimes, shared their basic approach. Ironically, perhaps, the Islamists' arguments often, albeit unintentionally, helped strengthen the status quo. Both of the main forces in the Arabic-speaking world agreed that the best course was not to abandon past practices, but to reinforce them properly.

Delegitimizing the Democratic Opposition

Clearly, the strengthening of the Arab nationalist narrative—reinforced by the partly contrasting Islamist one—tended to delegitimize the democratic opposition. This practice was followed in a far more direct manner as well. Reformers were branded as traitors and subversives. In the milder version, they were unintentionally doing the devil's work, though ultimately it was explained this did not matter.

Many examples of this situation can be offered, but one of the clearest is the Saad Eddin Ibrahim case in Egypt. Ibrahim, one of the Arab world's best social scientists, headed the Ibn Khaldoun Center, a think tank. In 2000, after Ibrahim and his center examined such sensitive issues as fixed elections, the treatment of Egypt's Christian minority, the quality of Egyptian schools, and the plan of President Husni Mubarak to name his own son as successor, a major campaign was launched by the government to discredit him. He and his staff were arrested, the center closed, and its staff charged with embezzlement, receiving foreign funds illegally, defaming Egypt's reputation, and bribery. In May 2001, Cairo's Supreme State Security Court found them all guilty. Twenty-two defendants were given suspended sentences, but Ibrahim was ordered to serve seven years of hard labor for "harming society's interests, values and laws."[10]

While direct repression was certainly one instrument used, what was ultimately more important was the ability to convince Egyptians that the regime was their friend while the reformers were their enemies. These tactics both, of course, discouraged others from following Ibrahim's example. When foreigners criticized the treatment of Ibrahim or tried to help him, this became another factor used in the government's campaign of discrediting its rivals.

The editor of a pro-government weekly wrote, "Those who ally themselves with foreign quarters to harm Egypt's national security… should be executed in a public square."[11] He sneered that Ibrahim's supporters thought defending his "crime" was more important "than defending Iraq and Palestine." Those advocating civil society and human rights in Egypt were merely proving

themselves to be Western lackeys threatening to lead Egypt into an "age of darkness."[12]

Repression

While Ibrahim was eventually released from prison and continued to voice his views, such intimidation was effective. A number of groups shifted their attention from domestic human rights to safer, populist issues such as supporting the Palestinian intifada and condemning sanctions against Iraq.[13] In other words, organizations that may have otherwise criticized the governance of their own country and demanded change were coopted into being allies of the regime, furthering its trump issues and foreign policy agenda.

There were an infinite variety of repressive acts. On one end of the spectrum, Summir Said, an Egyptian working for the Reuters bureau in Cairo, was threatened by the secret police in 1996.[14] In Syria, the government denied an operating permit to the National Organization for Human Rights in 2006.[15] Such actions lay at the lower end of the scale of repression. Merely calling in a dissident for questioning (which might include threats) or a brief jail term might be expected to yield results.

However, regimes do not hesitate to throw individuals seen as rally points for democratic oppositions, such as Fathi al-Jahmi in Libya, Ayman Nur in Egypt, or Michel Kilo in Syria into prison for longer terms. Again, every country is different, with Morocco and Jordan, for example, preferring cooption to repression, except in the case of clearly violent oppositionists.

Repression is often multilayered. For instance, the influential Kurdish cleric Mashuq al-Khaznawi was murdered in Syria under suspicious circumstances that made it appear to be a government operation. When his son accused the regime of the deed, he was arrested along with 49 Kurds who had participated in a rally demanding to know the truth about the killing.[16]

With its enormous resources for buying off dissent, Saudi Arabia and the other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates) rarely revert to force. In February 2007, for example, Saudi authorities arrested ten men on suspicion of funding terrorism charges, though their actual sin was apparently planning to form a political party. Three of them had previously signed a petition calling for free elections. Typical, too, of Saudi Arabia, those demanding reforms were Islamists. The petition accused the government of preventing reformers from traveling abroad, closing Internet sites, banning public demonstrations, and threatening state employees with dismissal for expressing opinions contrary to government policy.[17]

In effect, this minor incident revealed a great deal about the nature of the current struggle. On one hand, there are Islamists using the democracy card and employing nonviolent methods, though others continue to engage in terrorism. On the other hand, the regime wants to brand these dissenters as being linked to terrorism, which also has the advantage of appearing as a viable reason for suppression in Western eyes as well as scaring Saudis.

Still, it should be emphasized that there is no country that is the equivalent of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, where a word of criticism could lead to torture and murder. Although they define what is a misdemeanor or felony, there is some relative scale in terms of letting the punishment fit the crime. Perhaps the most repressive, other than Syria, is Libya. Its leader, Muammar Qadhafi, openly called on his supporters to kill anyone who asked for political change in the country: "If the enemy shows up you must finish it off because the enemy [wants] to exterminate you. We cannot tolerate that the enemy undermines the power of the people and the revolution."[18]

It should be remembered, though, that when threats against liberals come from Islamists, the regime usually does nothing to protect them or punish those making—and sometimes implementing—such warnings. In such circumstances, the radical Islamists become an arm of regime interests for all practical purposes. For example, in May 2006,

a Saudi Islamist Internet site published a statement condemning reformists as dangerously anti-Islamic Westernizers. The statement's signatories included government officials such as judges and employees of the education department. If anyone working for the government had signed a parallel reform manifesto, he would have been immediately fired.[19]

Warning of Islamist Gains and Instability as a Risk of Democratization

The fear that a loosening of political and social bonds might lead to instability was a real and logical concern for many. Abroad, they could look at the collapse of the USSR and Yugoslavia; or at how the impending election of Islamists in Algeria, blocked by a military coup, brought on a long and bloody civil war there. Iraq was also a warning of what might be, for in addition to an Islamist takeover, many countries—notably Syria and Lebanon—faced ethnic strife. Turkey too, though less often cited, showed how Islamists could win elections. More recently, gains by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and an election victory for Hamas in the Palestinian Authority drove the lesson home. Even the rise of low-level insurgencies, as in Saudi Arabia, set off warning signals of what might potentially happen. In light of all these things, the status quo did not look so bad for many people.

Regimes found many ways of incorporating these issues into their rhetoric. For example, Saudi Interior Minister Prince Nayif bin Abd al-Aziz, in charge of that government's counterinsurgency campaign, told his people that al-Qa'ida was a Western front group, part of an overall effort to sabotage Saudi Arabia, of which liberalization was another tactic.[20]

The growing power of Islamists is clearly evident and has been enhanced by elections. Aside from state balloting, the professional organizations, whose leaders are elected in relatively fair elections, have become dominated by Islamists in, for example, Egypt and Jordan. Even though the Islamists are enemies of the regime, the government often favors their activities over those of liberals since the Islamists often—though of course not always—produce parallel ideas that reinforce the regimes' positions. Moreover, the Islamists' strength also frightens people into supporting the regime. As one Egyptian analyst has written, "Propagators of extremist [Islamist] thought are given a free hand to spread their ideas by all means (as long as they are not overly critical of the regime). On the other hand, efforts by civil society are systematically obstructed…." On programs broadcast on state television, Islamist preachers condemn liberals and reform while not being allowed to voice negative remarks toward the regime.[21]

Aside from their "objective cooperation" with the government, the Islamists also block a movement for reform in their own right, even if they support fairer elections as being in their own interest. As the Syrian researcher Burhan Ghaliun put it, also indicating the heightened pessimism of liberals:

> The main problem…is that the clerics have become the leading shapers of public opinion…. Arab societies are held hostage by two authorities: [One is the] political dictatorship…. [The other is]… the clerics—even those opposing these regimes—who tyrannize Arab public opinion nowadays…. There is a kind of undeclared, practical alliance between the political dictatorship and the dictatorship of the religious authority [which accuses reformers] of secularism, which means heresy, or by accusing them of modernism, of having ties with the West, or of collaborating with colonialism. In their conduct, they do not really differ from the Arab dictatorial regimes…. They have won the war of culture….[22]

Consequently, as Bruce Maddy-Weitzman explains in discussing Tunisia:

> The… elites and middle class alike, fearful of the consequences of a rising political Islam in a society noted for its relatively liberal and secular ambience, essentially

> agreed to their indefinite political emasculation in return for the regime's repression of the Islamist movement and the maintenance of a liberal economy and the existing legal and social frameworks.[23]

Pretending Reform

Arab rulers and their supporters—including government employees in the media, education, and even religious institutions—often stress that their countries are already wonderfully governed and truly democratic. In Qadhafi's words, "Our political path is the correct one as it grants freedom to the whole people, sovereignty, power and wealth to the whole people."[24]

An easy and low-cost response is for governments to state that they have already made reforms, are in the process of doing so, are studying such measures, or will do so in future. There are many such statements and claims. Entire supposedly civil society institutions are created under state control to propagandize for the government's virtue and to crowd out independent counterparts.

For example, Bahrain created a High Council for Women that was used, according to a woman's rights activist there, to hinder non-governmental women's societies and to block the registration of the independent Women's Union for many years.[25] In Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Abdallah established a forum for national dialogue and invited a wide variety of people to attend, but the recommendations arising from the discussions, which were held in a beautiful building created solely to house the meetings, were very conservative and at any rate had no effect. In the media, *al-Watan*, a publication owned by a prince, ran more liberal articles, but then its editor, Jamal Khashoggi, was fired by the regime shortly after criticizing clerics for supporting Islamist terrorists. Husayn Shobokshi was allowed to publish an article describing a liberal future Saudi Arabia in an English-language paper but not in Arabic; he soon lost his column as a result.[26]

Prince Sultan bin Turki bin Abd al-Aziz made liberal pronouncements but then was reportedly lured by Saudi officials to a meeting in Geneva, drugged, and forcibly returned to a house arrest in Riyadh.[27] In March 2004, the Saudi government approved the establishment of an official human rights association, whose members flew off to London to explain how the kingdom was moving toward liberalization. A few days later, 13 prominent independent liberals were taken into police custody and charged with endangering national unity. Those who promised not to petition for reform or to talk to reporters were quickly released. One reformer remarked, "This will make people lose trust in the government and their promises. It contradicts 100 percent what they have been promising."[28]

A useful gimmick regimes use is the creation of their own human rights or civil society groups, which can then be guaranteed not to cause any problems for the government. In the Saudi case, a leading prince explained that dissidents were those rebelling "against their fathers and their country" and thus could not expect support from the state-backed human rights body. "I urge you not to think that the national human rights association was founded to assist offenders" against the law, he said. The new chairman of this National Organization for Human Rights, Abdallah bin Salah al-Ubayd, explained that "there are those who consider certain issues a violation of human rights, while we consider them a safeguard to human rights. For example, executions, amputating the hand of a thief, or flogging an adulterer."[29]

In Egypt, the state-backed National Council for Human Rights remains quite vague in its discussion of issues, including nothing that would offend the government, indeed avoiding any serious discussion of the country at all.[30] The regime even sponsored a journal on democracy, producing more copies in English than in Arabic and publishing little about the Arab world and almost nothing about Egypt in its pages. In addition, the government presented its own reform program. Reformists did not expect any real change but were uncertain as to how they could respond effectively.[31]

Similarly, there were promises in many countries of reforming education to make it more tolerance-oriented, but these were accompanied by little action and sometimes even high-level denials that any change would indeed be made.[32] In Saudi Arabia, no government action was taken against 160 clerics, many of them government employees, who accused liberals of being traitors loyal to infidels and denounced educational reform as a plot by "the Zionist-Crusader government in Washington… to convert the Muslims to another religion."[33] If any government employees would have made such strong statements demanding reform or liberalization, they would have been immediately fired.[34]

Even the most transparent exercises were used by regimes to claim democracy. While this might not have been so effective, it certainly seemed to please the regimes themselves as a strategy. In Yemen, Ali Abdallah Salah, who had ruled for 28 years, had himself elected in 1999, with 96 percent[35] of the vote and in 2006, by 77 percent.[36] In 2000, Bashar al-Asad was elected president of Syria with 97.29 percent of the votes.[37] Since his father was elected in 1999 by 99.9 percent of the votes,[38] the 2.7 reduction in unanimity might be taken to represent the degree of democratic opening represented by his new regime.[39] Syrian parliamentary elections in 2007, for example, were also conducted without opposition candidates and with the regime's party choosing two-thirds of the candidates as well as approving the remaining "independents."

Making Reforms

In Bahrain, there were fair, multiparty elections in October 2002, despite a history of unrest from the majority Shi'a Muslims against the minority Sunni-controlled government.[40] The opposition was legalized and security forces curbed. Kuwait also held periodic free and fair elections, with Islamists doing well but not gaining control of parliament.

The way things could be was illustrated by an event in tiny Bahrain in January 2004. Bahrain's elected parliament held a special televised session to denounce alleged government corruption in managing the country's pension funds. Members, including Islamists, demanded that accused cabinet members resign for making bad investments that benefited themselves, change the system, and return the lost money. One liberal member declared that the special session showed the people that parliament was not a "rubber stamp" for the regime.[41]

The government denied the accusations and presented its defense to the legislators. Yet a high official proclaimed himself "happy" to be part of "this historic day" on which Bahrain's democracy showed itself so well. "The government supports the Parliament's eagerness to exercise its monitoring role," he added. "I am really proud of the work done by the special committee."[42] In turn, parliamentarians praised the ruler's democratic reforms and the government for its cooperation.[43]

Still, even in Bahrain there are many questions about both government manipulation and the problems of Islamist gains. Ghada Jamshir, president of the Committee of Women's Petition there stated, for example, "There is a lot of talk about progress and achievements in regard to women's rights…. [Yet] on the other hand, the injustice and suffering continue." She notes that ten of the eleven women who became members of the 40-member legislature were appointed because they supported the regime, while only one who won the election on her own was nominated by the government in a district with few people and no competing candidate. Still, this might be held in the government's favor since it did not have to give 25 percent representation to women.

The point is that while the government was willing to have women on the council, it preferred they support it. Jamshir also charges that in the assembly:

> As a result of government manipulation of elections, the majority… are members of Islamist groups who have other priorities than

> women's rights. Many campaigners for human rights, including women, lost the election to Islamists backed by the government, as a result of using the floating votes of military men and newly nationalized persons.[44]
>
> If so, this is a good example of the government-Islamist alliance at work.

She also points out that while women now serve in positions as the minister of health and social affairs, the head of Bahrain University, and a candidate to head the UN General Assembly, only eight percent of high government positions are held by women. Reforms, of course, do take time, and the key question is whether progress continues or not. Another issue is that the great majority benefit relatively little from these changes. Women still have great difficulties with divorce and child custody issues, and, according to Jamshir, the government is holding up a family law reform as a bargaining chip with the Islamists, another common problem. She concludes that the reforms so far are counterproductive: "The struggle for women's rights in Bahrain has become more difficult. That is because of the new government approach and policies, which pretend to be the protector of women's rights by implementing artificial and marginal reforms."[45] Whether valid or not, this certainly reveals the pessimistic tone of reformists today.

The system allowed for more openness while setting strict limits. After the human rights activist al-Mazal Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja criticized Bahrain's prime minister in a public lecture in October 2004, he was arrested, tried, and sentenced to one year in prison for "inciting hatred of the regime by publicly calling it corrupt." His Bahrain Center for Human Rights was disbanded. Within hours of the sentencing, however, he was pardoned by the country's monarch. Khawaja then stated he would continue his efforts on behalf of human rights. An undertone to the affair was that Khawaja, who had recently returned to the country after 22 years living in Europe, was a member of the Shi'a Muslim majority in a country ruled by a Sunni Muslim dynasty. Thus, either repressing him or allowing democracy became immediately entangled in potentially explosive sectarian issues.[46]

However, these are exceptions and limited ones at that. In contrast, consider Jordan, rightly seen as one of the most moderately ruled Arab state. In an article for a Western newspaper, Foreign Minister Marwan Muasher explained that the Arab world must "take the initiative" to become more democratic. This cannot happen overnight, of course, and forcing the pace could lead to radicalization. U.S. pressure to do so is "alienating Arabs and jeopardizing the efforts of genuine reformers, who now cannot advocate democracy without being accused of doing America's bidding." Yet the Arab world is ready to manage this transition itself. How do we know? Because, he explains, Jordan's king and queen have endorsed the UN Arab Human Development Report![47]

Is this sufficient? Jordanians elected a new parliament in 2003, choosing mostly pro-government representatives. The elections were honest but unfair. Ever since the prime minister had dissolved the previous parliament two years earlier, he had decreed dozens of "temporary laws" limiting free speech, tightening press controls, and gerrymandering districts to ensure the regime's victory. Amman, with a higher proportion of dissidents, had about one parliament member for 52,000 voters, compared to just 6,000 people in Kerak, a regime stronghold. The number of seats was expanded from 80 to 110, giving more power to pro-government areas. As a result, Islamists received only 17 out of 110 seats, far fewer than they might have won in a fair system.[48] However, if Islamists were to win, the result would hardly be conducive to stability or holding any future elections, much less the changes required to raise living standards and expand civil rights.

The main concern of Jordan's government seemed to be to appease the Islamists without giving them any real power while making empty promises of more consultation and partnership.[49] At the same time, though,

Jordanians do enjoy more freedom than most other Arabs. It is probable that this greater openness provides an escape valve, reducing the level of Islamist violence in Jordan.

Jordan, then, is more of a democracy in appearance than in practice, since elections are not fair reflections of the population's views. In theory, parliament can dismiss the prime minister and cabinet; in practice, the opposite is more likely to happen. All the senate's members are appointed by the king. The legislature is dominated by opponents of reform, either because they are instruments of the regime or radical Islamists.

Kuwait's parliament, elected freely, has a variety of groups, representing a spectrum from Islamists through tribal conservatives to liberals, Sunni and Shi'a, though the balance of power is still held by the monarch through his ability to appoint a large share of the members.[50] In Jordan, there is no organized liberal party as such, in part because the monarchy plays the role of reformer, albeit to a very limited extent. The Islamist opposition is partly coopted by being allowed to have a sizeable, but always minority, share of seats in parliament.

An important example of genuine reform has been the Tunisian educational system, even in the Islamic university, which stresses tolerance and a pluralistic interpretation of Islam. Tunisia also has the most advanced laws on gender equality in terms of rights and family law. However, this makes it stand all the more in contrast to the form and content of the educational process in other countries.[51] At the same time, Tunisia is authoritarian and repressive, marked by fixed elections and a dismal human rights record. This is an example of how complex and contradictory the situation with which reformers must contend is.

In Morocco, there is a lively civil society and strong women's groups.[52] King Hassan, who died in 1999, used the phrase "homeopathic democracy," which meant, in Bruce Maddy-Weitzman's words, "controlled, measured steps at political liberalization while the makhzen (the traditional term for Morocco's ruling security-bureaucratic apparatus), headed by the monarch, continued to maintain overweening control." His son and successor, Muhammad, quickened the pace of change. The slogan used was "development and *ijtihad*," meaning liberalization within the parameters of Islamic law rather than a mere imitation of tradition. This includes holding fair elections. The goal is to stabilize the regime, including the recruitment of allies among liberals and women who will join it in opposing Islamism, as well as taking into consideration their goals and demands. While the regime also tries to appease Islamists, this may be the country where the regime-liberal alliance has gone the furthest. Still, Morocco's democracy involves a large amount of cooption in which the palace manipulates political parties by offering them a share in power.[53]

Particularly impressive are steps toward democratization and reform being taken in the smaller Gulf Arab states. For example, the 2007 Qatar municipal elections saw 51.1 percent of the total eligible voters voting. Almost half of them were female. The polling went smoothly, and the voting stations were policed to avoid violations of law. "Gone are the days when people voted for members of their family or tribe. Now the voters are more critical and they are looking at the qualifications of the candidate and whether they are capable of doing some good job in their constituency," said one voter.[54]

Of course, there are definite limitations and flaws in the developments regarding Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. Hereditary rule remains, and the royal families still dominate the system. Yet the progress has been undeniably impressive. There also seems to be a strengthening of what might be called the democratic mentality. Islamists participate in this process and often win parliamentary seats in large numbers. Yet their attitudes seem far more moderate than those of their counterparts in countries such as Egypt, Jordan, or Saudi Arabia.

Generally, with the notable exception of Saudi Arabia, a greater dynamism at the bottom and flexibility at the top seems evident in the "reactionary" monarchies of the Gulf

and in Morocco, as compared to the "progressive" Arab nationalist regimes, which increasingly seem like the Soviet Union in its most dinosaur-like period. Yet again this is relatively more democratic and pluralist than the intransigent alternatives. Also, fears of instability or an even worse regime due to a too rapid or extensive change are not merely phony.

REFORM MOVEMENT RESPONSES

How did the reform movements respond to all these difficulties and pressures? Two factors should be emphasized.

First, the liberals were generally depressed and discouraged, seeing their lack of progress and popularity as well as the obstacles put in their way clearly. No doubt, this situation prevented others from joining their ranks, making some of them reduce or abandon activism, and contributed to splits in their ranks.

Second, seeing this, there was a strong temptation for liberals to water down their arguments, sometimes themselves coming to advocate radical and populist views long typical of their Arab nationalist and Islamist rivals.

Unattractive Alternatives

Each individual and group faced an extraordinarily difficult choice. Given the fact that the main struggle was between the Arab nationalist regimes and the Islamists, liberals needed to consider taking sides. If they feared an Islamist takeover would lead to an even less free society, they might side with the government against the Islamists. The fact that the regime would reward them for doing so and that most reformers had a relatively Westernized, secular worldview—at least compared with the average in their society—dividing them from the Islamists were additional incentives. This pattern prevailed, for example, in Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. Even though Saudi reformers were highly religious compared to liberal counterparts in other countries, they faced the political alternative of an al-Qa'ida regime.

Another possible choice was to side with the Islamists against the regime. This decision arose from a deep hatred for the regime. Given his personal experience, it is understandable that Saad Eddin Ibrahim was the most important liberal to take this road. In an article explaining why he advocated an alliance with the Islamists, Ibrahim showed how deeply impressed he was by the popularity of Hizballah, Hamas, Iran, al-Qa'ida, the Muslim Brotherhood, and their leaders in Egypt. "The pattern here is clear, and it is Islamic." In contrast, the incumbent leaders of Arab countries are less popular. Egyptians are moving toward Islamism, he concludes. "More mainstream Islamists with broad support, developed civic dispositions and services to provide are the most likely actors in building a new Middle East." Clearly, he sees the Islamists as the winning side and believes that since they cannot be defeated they must be coopted.[55]

Yet this strategy also coincides with a belief that the Islamists can be "tamed" by participating in the system or even in taking power. At times, it has been suggested that having to develop pragmatic solutions to real problems and deal with the exigencies of electoral political life—if it were no longer possible to merely repeat the slogan, "Islam is the answer!"—they would face splits and a reduced popularity. The idea of alliance with the Islamists against the regime most often appeared, but not exclusively so, in Egypt, in part because Islamists successfully infiltrated the reform movement.

A prime example of the populist and Islamist-oriented strategy took place with the Kifaya movement in Egypt. When the group focused its criticism on the government of President Husni Mubarak and such sensitive issues as his possible intention of having his own son as successor, it was harassed and repressed. Thus, it turned to attacks on America and Israel instead, the historic distraction and scapegoat strategy of nationalists and Islamists. In a September 2006 meeting, attended by both the Muslim

Brotherhood and Kifaya leaders, a campaign was launched to try to get Egypt to repeal its peace treaty with Israel.[56] Nevertheless, even engaging in such demagoguery did not help. The organization's decline continued with a December 2006 demonstration attracting only 100 people.[57]

Of course, liberals have not had to choose between alliance with Arab nationalist regimes or Islamists but can keep their principled independence and criticize both sides. Many did in fact do so. However, this was an even more difficult strategy to follow, one isolating them to a greater extent and limiting any role they might play in actual events. Furthermore, there is always the hope of influencing one of the far more powerful groups—the government toward greater openness or the Islamists toward more moderation.

Profound Pessimism

Things were clearly not going well for the reformers. Kifaya, as a December 2006 AP report on the organization stated, "is divided and demoralized its members split over a host of issues…. 'Nobody is listening. They've demonstrated so many times but nothing has changed,'" said a young student watching a small Kifaya protest. Within the organization, Marxists, leftists, Arab nationalists, Islamists, and secular liberals battled each other. Indeed, some of Kifaya's own members, "deep inside, are against democracy and reform," said Bahay al-Din Hassan, director of Cairo Center for Human Rights Studies. One of those leaving Kifaya said its leaders were acting like "dictators." Islamist leaders quit to protest Kifaya issuing a statement supporting Egypt's culture minister, who had criticized the Islamic veil as a sign of "backward thinking."[58]

The reformist Wafd party also split when a leadership struggle ended in gunfire between two factions in a battle for control over the group's headquarters.[59] This conflict may well have been intensified by the provocations of infiltrating government agents who staged an internal coup. The ousted head of the party was arrested by the government.

The Problem of Inconsistency

Another serious problem is that liberal forces are unwilling to respect democracy when they fight radical Islamists, sometimes in alliance with the regimes. An interesting example took place in November 2006, when a columnist wrote in the Kuwaiti newspaper *al-Siyassa* that deposed Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was a hero and that the Arabs should support the Iraqi "resistance," both positions contrary to those of Kuwait itself. In response, Kuwaiti Information Minister Muhammad al-San'usi said that the newspaper would be charged with "publishing reports that negatively impact Kuwaiti society."[60]

A further inconsistency was pointed out by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, who said that liberals "were driven into a collective 'craze' when the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Jordan and in other Arab countries decided to become political parties and to take part in the 'democratic' game, in accordance with the existing rules," despite anti-democratic government policies limiting rights. If liberals really wanted democracy they would welcome the Islamists' decision and participation.[61] In fact, what liberals really wanted was only:

> 'Democracy' that will bring them to power, without their having to take it upon themselves to descend to the level of the 'masses,' the 'rabble'—or, in more elegant terminology, 'the man on the street'—and without having to rub shoulders with him and to understand his situation.[62]

To act this way, he concludes, is an "intentional falsification of the values of rationalism and liberalism." The problem, of course, is that the liberal and reform movement is simultaneously one that advocates a specific method and a particular outcome. It argues that democratic norms are best but also aims for a large number of changes in society as well. To isolate elections from the entire reform program brings up, in the context of radical Islamist movements, the well-known problem of authoritarian

movements using democratic means to come to power.

Even if one restricts the scope of discussion to democratic methods, there still remains the problem—raising understandable concerns among reformers—of the use of anti-democratic methods in terms of argument (terming opponents as heretics and traitors) and strategies (violence, including incitement to kill). Beyond that lies the doubt in the sincerity of democratic professions on the part of Islamists, the likelihood of what has been called, "One man, one vote, one time." That is, if victorious, the Islamists would revoke the democracy that brought them to power.

Still, these are real difficulties, not so much because liberals will be criticized for hypocrisy, but because they genuinely do face the potential triumph of an anti-democratic movement, or perhaps what should be called two anti-democratic ones—Arab nationalism and Islamism.

At any rate, Abu Zayd demonstrates this very point by revealing that he is advocating the popular stance of subordinating everything to the struggle against foreigners. He writes:

> Resistance is not 'adventure,' but rather the only existing option at the moment for our peoples, after the [true] face of the modern Arab nation has been exposed...
>
> You are against Hamas, against Hizballah, and against the Muslim Brotherhood because of their religious ideology. You are afraid that their growing stronger will lead to the establishment of religious states, but [by ignoring] Israel, you reveal that your liberalism and rationalism are not just phony; they are destructive rationalism. This is American rationalism, in which an idea is correct to the degree that it is useful.[63]

So quickly, as often happens—indeed, usually happens—the liberal concern over Islamism is transformed into proof that they are in fact Zionist and American agents, traitors, and hold ideas that are heretical in patriotic terms. With such delegitimization as the norm, of course, democratic debate is impossible.

Nevertheless, the liberals' twin problems remain. Arab nationalists and Islamists are more popular than reformers, are willing (and by their doctrines, able) to use more extreme methods, fit better with the traditional and existing worldviews, and are adept at employing demagoguery and xenophobia to succeed. Moreover, the regimes have a wide repertoire of tools—including both the Islamists themselves and fear of the Islamists simultaneously—to inhibit democracy and reform.

POLICY ALTERNATIVES

As so often happens with Middle East issues, this leaves the West, and the United States in particular, with unpalatable policy alternatives. A primary emphasis on democratization is both unlikely to succeed and raises problems of its own. In this context, however, two policy themes are both important and reasonable.

First, support for reform and democratization should be an important part of the U.S. policy arsenal. This is true for several reasons. In the long term, the erosion of dictatorship and the mentality that accompanies it is the only way that regional problems might be solved; for dictatorship stands in the way of a more peaceful, tolerant region, not to mention the spread of human rights, a decline in extremism, and socioeconomic progress. Such a policy is both morally right and expedient in terms of U.S. interests.

At the same time, however, the fact is that the United States needs good relations with key regimes for a variety of purposes, ranging from Iraq to the Arab-Israeli conflict to the war against terrorism, as well as economic relationships. In addition, pressure on these regimes for reform and greater democracy could be destabilizing and bring increasingly extreme and repressive governments, even if they achieve power through democratic

means. Of course, the existing regimes are likely to ignore U.S. efforts to change them and even turn U.S. efforts into anti-American propaganda as examples of imperialistic interference.

The way to deal with this contradiction is not to ignore it, but to develop a reasonably balanced policy that deals with both aspects. A stated policy of support for change and small-scale aid to reformers can accompany a realpolitik approach to alliances with Arab dictatorships. Achieving a balance has often been difficult for U.S. policy, but that does not mean this is an incorrect strategy.

Special recognition should be given to the fairly successful efforts of countries such as Morocco and the smaller Gulf Arab states to evolve their systems in the right direction. The United States also should not be afraid to intervene energetically, if verbally, on specific cases of human rights abuses. It does not have to endorse unfair elections, for example, and it should wage ideological struggle against both of the extremist ideologies that dominate the Arab world. After all, the United States too provides a wide variety of strategic, diplomatic, and economic services to the relatively more moderate Arab states, and it has a right to ask for things in return up to a reasonable point.

Every country, certainly, is different in its mix of politics, ideology, problems, and policies. This leads to a second important point. With the exception of Saudi Arabia, there is a real distinction between more moderate and more extreme states, not only in the fact that they are friendlier to the West and less aggressive externally but also in regard to their internal nature. Many criticisms can be made, for instance, against Egypt's domestic policies and system. Yet Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco—to pick several countries—are genuinely more moderate and less oppressive than Syria, Sudan, and Libya, or Iraq under Saddam Hussein.

The United States, then, can and should legitimately draw distinctions. Greater effort and a higher level of criticism or even sanctions can be employed against the radical states precisely because they are radical. The level of free speech or civil society in Egypt is far more open than that in Syria. While it can be charged that the United States is inconsistent or using criticism over dictatorship as a strategic tool, setting priorities along these lines makes sense not only in terms of national interests but also on the merits of the cases themselves.

Finally, there should be a realistic assessment of the situation. With the exception of the few countries mentioned above where progress is apparent, the democratic movements are not doing so well. Generally, they are lagging far behind the radical Arab nationalists—whose staying power should not be underestimated—and the radical Islamists. Even given the gains made by the Islamists, with the exception of the Palestinians, the Arab nationalist status quo is still winning and enjoys majority support.

In short, the regimes' strategy worked to turn back the democratic challenge. In the long run things might turn out differently, but it is going to be a very long run indeed.

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NOTES

[1] These issues were examined in great detail in the author's *The Long War for Freedom: The Arab Struggle for Democracy in the Middle East* (New York: Wiley, 2005) to which readers are urged to refer.
[2] Far more detailed and extensive documentation, as well as multiple examples of these points, are provided in the author's books: *The Truth about Syria* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2007); *The Long War for Freedom: The Arab Struggle for Democracy in the Middle East* (New York: John Wiley, 2005); and *The Tragedy of the Middle East* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
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