

## Democracy Promotion in the Middle East: Restoring Credibility

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The Bush administration's effort to foster democratic transformation in the Middle East has not had a significant impact on Arab countries, which remain largely autocratic. After a brief period of ferment in 2004–2005, Middle Eastern politics has become stagnant again. Moreover, the Bush policy—never clearly defined, long on rhetoric, short on strategy, and fitfully implemented—has undermined U.S. credibility and will make it more difficult for the next administration to devise a successful approach to political reform in the region.

The new administration must devise a new policy. While it is imperative that the United States abandon the mixture of simplistic assumptions and missionary fervor of the last few years, ignoring the need for reform and simply supporting friendly regimes are not a viable alternative. Such policy will not maintain stability in a region that is transforming rapidly economically and socially, because stability will depend on the ability of regimes to adapt to change rather than cling to the status quo. Moreover, fewer countries now, and even fewer in the future, are willing to embrace the United States unconditionally: “Friendly to the United States” has become a relative concept at best. Thus, the United States needs a

new approach toward regimes that are facing deep political challenges but do not see the United States as either a model to imitate or a reliable ally.

### Democracy Promotion Since 2001

Democracy promotion by the United States in the Arab world since September 11, 2001, has had three components. The most visible has been the Bush administration's high-flying rhetoric—the so-called freedom agenda. Hinging originally on the assumption that U.S. intervention would transform Iraq into a thriving democracy that would in turn influence the entire Arab world, the rhetoric rang increasingly hollow as Iraq slid into conflict. Worse, by holding up Iraq as a model of democratic transformation long after this was plausible, Washington helped convince many in the Arab world that “democracy promotion” was only a euphemism for forcible regime change. Finally, the rhetoric created a backlash among supporters of political reform by promising an active U.S. role that failed to materialize.

The second component of the approach has been pressure on specific countries to modify their domestic policies. Most of the pressures were quite general and ill-conceived. Saudi Arabia and Egypt, for example, were singled

### SUMMARY

The Bush administration's democratization rhetoric was never buttressed by an unambiguous, sustained policy to promote political reform. Concerns about security and stability have now virtually halted U.S. democracy promotion efforts. This is a short-sighted policy because political reform is imperative in countries where political systems remain stagnant in the face of rapid societal change. The United States needs to renew its efforts, taking into account that past policies have undermined its credibility in the region. It thus must abandon the empty rhetoric of the last few years in favor of modest goals developed and pursued in cooperation with regional and local actors, rather than imposed from Washington.



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out after September 11 for contributing to the rise of terrorism because their authoritarianism engendered frustrations that led to terrorism. Such criticism angered the governments but did not point to specific steps they should take, much less to overall reform strategies. But occasionally the United States also applied pressure to obtain specific responses. For example, the administration halted negotiations for a free trade agreement with Egypt early in 2006 to show its displeasure about human rights violations and put pressure on President Hosni Mubarak to free former presidential candidate Ayman Nour. Although Washington did not succeed in this instance, the pressure had a clearly defined goal and, applied consistently, might have brought results over the long run. In contrast, the United States had some success in extracting limited legal reform in Oman and the United Arab Emirates through free trade agreement negotiations.

The third element of Bush's democracy promotion has been the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). Funded at just \$430 million over the six years since its launch in 2002, the program consists of small-scale initiatives to promote women's rights, education, or entrepreneurship in seventeen recipient countries. The projects are based on the reasonable assumption that democratic transformation requires social, economic, and cultural change, not just a change in political institutions. The disparity between MEPI's ambitious goals and modest funding, however, condemned the program to marginality from the start.

### Smoke Without Fire

The actual content of the U.S. freedom agenda—the details of what Washington has actually been doing—is little understood in the Arab world. MEPI is virtually unknown outside a narrow circle of grant recipients. Diplomatic pressure exerted on specific governments is mostly out of the public eye. What has received attention, apart from the high-flying rhetoric, is the military intervention in

Iraq, which has created much resentment and convinced many that the United States would use strong-arm methods elsewhere to get rid of regimes it did not like.

The rhetoric about democracy elicited three contradictory responses, simultaneously and often from the same people. The first and most prevalent was anger against U.S. hubris and interference in Arab domestic matters. The second was the opposite: anger because the United States had supported authoritarian regimes rather than democracy in the past, and because it was still not doing enough to support change. The third was the more complex: a grudging recognition that, regardless of the problems of U.S. policy, the political deficiencies of Arab countries are real and change is badly needed. Of course, Arabs did not start discovering the political problems of their countries and developing a desire for change when President Bush started discussing democracy. There is no doubt, nevertheless, that the flood of mostly hostile writing elicited by the launching of the freedom agenda did have the effect of stimulating debate and creating a degree of excitement.

Real change was another matter. Once past the initial moments of uncertainty about U.S. intentions, incumbent regimes saw little reason to rush into reforms, particularly as it became clear that the Bush administration would welcome modest, even cosmetic, reforms with exaggerated praise. Not surprisingly, the pace of reform continued to be driven by domestic factors. With incumbent regimes firmly in control and the opposition weak, governments decided on the type and extent of reform. This led to economic and administrative reform measures in some countries and even some political reform, as long as it could be done without undermining the power of the regime. Bahrain, for example, allowed the partial election of one parliamentary chamber, guaranteeing that the opposition would remain a minority presence. But nowhere in the Arab world in the last five years has there been

a redistribution of power away from the king or the president and toward the legislatures, nor an increase in the influence of the opposition. A factor that greatly helped Arab regimes curtail reform was the presence of Islamist political parties and movements. Governments were able to play up the danger these parties represented and cast themselves as the bastion against the rise of Islamic states, thus defusing U.S. pressure.

### Lessons Learned

Despite their singular lack of success, the spasmodic attempts to stimulate democratic change undertaken by the Bush administration may help devise a better approach in the future if the lessons of their failure are heeded.

The first lesson concerns the United States, its goals in advocating political reform, and its risk tolerance, which has proven to be low and is likely to decrease even further as a result of the region's multiple crises. The Bush administration never pondered at the outset what democratization entails: that the redistribution of political power is always a conflictual process, and that in the Arab world it would be driven not by liberal political parties and western-style organizations of civil society but by movements based on religious and ethnic identity. Nor did it take into consideration that any real progress toward democracy would produce unpredictable outcomes, which would undermine hostile and friendly regimes alike and empower untested political players. When events showed that increased political participation could lead to results unfavorable to the administration, Washington quickly retreated.

Since the launch of the freedom agenda, there have been only two instances in which the change brought about by an electoral process led to a real shift in the distribution of power. The parliamentary election in Egypt in late 2005 and the elections for the Palestinian parliament in January 2006 were the embodiment of the more open election process that

the United States had been advocating for the region but not of the results it had envisaged. In Egypt, 88 members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, a banned organization, won parliamentary seats by running as independents. In Palestine, the more radical Hamas defeated the incumbent Fatah and won a large majority of seats.

In Palestine, the U.S. response was immediate and harsh. Because Hamas has been designated as a terrorist organization, refuses to recognize the state of Israel, and has an Islamist bent, Washington did not recognize the government it formed as legitimate, imposed sanctions, and did not hide its support for Presi-

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dent Mahmoud Abbas, a Fatah member, over Prime Minister Ismail Haniyya, who represented Hamas. Washington also helped undermine a Saudi-brokered government of national unity including both Hamas and Fatah. The show-down between the two factions eventually turned into an armed clash that left Hamas in control of an increasingly embattled and besieged Gaza and Fatah in control of a West Bank fragmented by Israeli settlements and security barriers. The experience in Palestine also left the United States in a quandary, leery of elections and the people's choice.

U.S. response to the electoral success of the Muslim Brotherhood was less dramatic. The Brotherhood won only about 20 percent of the seats, many more than it ever had, but not enough to threaten the stability of a well-established regime with a strong security apparatus. Nevertheless, the election outcome virtually put an end to U.S. pressure on the Egyptian government to reform. In April 2008, after Hosni Mubarak's government won about 98 percent of seats in the municipal council

elections after arresting hundreds of Muslim Brothers and preventing many more from registering as candidates, the U.S. Department of State's only comment was that Egypt had to implement reforms at its own pace.

These experiences show that the United States has little stomach for the risks entailed in a true political transition. Although this is understandable in a dangerous area of the world, the risk of change can also be exagger-

ated in specific cases—Muslim Brotherhood participation in the April 2008 local elections was at most a mild threat to the ruling party's patronage machine, for example. Furthermore, a policy that rejects the uncertainty of change in favor of the status quo entails its own risks, simply postponing the possibility of political turmoil without encouraging positive change. In the long run, many of the regimes that the United States is again supporting will not remain viable without reform. Nevertheless, the desire to avoid risk in the short run is unlikely to change after the U.S. elections, no matter who wins. The next president will face crisis conditions in Iraq and Palestine, an Iran determined to continue its uranium enrichment program, an unstable Lebanon, extremely high oil prices, and a growing concern among oil producers in the Gulf about the impact on their economies of the downward slide in the value of the dollar. Under the circumstances, the choice of an aggressive and potentially destabilizing policy to promote a real shift in the distribution of power appears unlikely—and it would be unwise.

The second lesson concerns the conditions in the Middle East that are bound to affect the outcome of political reform. U.S. experts have a tendency to think of democracy promotion in benign terms of increased popular participation in elections, change in values, citizens' education, and institution-building. But democratic transformation is first and foremost a question of politics in the most basic sense of the term: which organized groups have the capacity to get what and how. In other words, a democratic transformation may or may not happen depending on the goals and interests of the main political forces in a country and the balance of power among them. In most Arab countries, that balance at present is not favorable to democratic change.

Three sets of political actors determine the possibility of democratic change in the Middle East: incumbent regimes, liberal or leftist parties (secular parties for short), and Islamist parties

"For 60 years, the United States pursued stability at the expense of democracy ... and we achieved neither. Now, we are taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspiration of all people...President Mubarak has unlocked the door for change. Now, the Egyptian Government must put its faith in its own people..."

—*Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at the American University in Cairo, June 20, 2005*

"[It has been no] secret that we have talked to the Egyptian Government about the importance of political and economic reform in Egyptian society ... But fundamentally, they are going to have to arrive at their own decisions about the pace and the direction of this reform."

—*Sean McCormack, State Department spokesman, responding to a question about Egypt's unfree local elections, April 7, 2008*

"In Saudi Arabia, brave citizens are demanding accountable government. And some good first steps toward openness have been taken with recent municipal elections. Yet many people pay an unfair price for exercising their basic rights."

—*Condoleezza Rice at the American University in Cairo, June 20, 2005*

"I hereby certify that Saudi Arabia is cooperating with efforts to combat international terrorism and that the proposed assistance will help facilitate that effort."

—*President Bush, in a letter to Condoleezza Rice supporting an estimated \$20 billion arms deal with the kingdom and other Gulf states, October 19, 2007*

ties and movements. Some Gulf monarchies where political life remains largely confined to relations within the ruling family as well as a regime like Libya's that has suppressed political organizing of any kind are exceptions. The relative capacity of these groups to attract support on the basis of both their message and their organizing skills (or to impose control in the case of regimes) will determine each country's political course. Civil society organizations, often extolled as the key to democratic transformation, play a much lesser role in practice. Incumbent regimes are the most powerful of these actors, with considerable capacity to co-opt or repress opponents and thus maintain the initiative. They may want a degree of economic and administrative reform, but they reject power-sharing. Secular parties, which the West sees as potential partners, are extremely weak. They have difficulty formulating a message. Liberal parties tend to focus on abstract principles, and leftist parties, already tainted by the failure of Arab socialism, have lost their traditional demand for social justice to Islamist organizations. Furthermore, most secular parties have not made a major investment in organization. The Islamist parties, however, are a force to be reckoned with. This does not mean that they have the allegiance of the majority of the population—in fact, many Arabs fear Islamist organizations—but they have an attractive message, deliver valuable social services, have invested heavily in organizing, and have a reputation for moral integrity.

The third lesson, which is becoming painfully evident worldwide as well as in the region, is that democracy is now in retreat. The post-Cold War “end of history” euphoria about the inevitability of democracy has been replaced by sobering evidence that progress toward democracy is neither inevitable nor irreversible. Democracy promotion is being increasingly challenged and resented, and semiauthoritarian or even authoritarian regimes are consolidating in many countries. This makes incumbent regimes more confident, democracy

promoters more uncertain, and the prospects for change more dim.

### Working Within Our Means

The United States' extreme aversion to the risk inherent in democracy promotion, the realities of the distribution of power among political actors in the region, and the growing international climate of democratic re-

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trenchment and backlash against democracy promotion all suggest that renewed efforts by the United States to support and encourage political reform in the Arab world should be quite different from those of the recent past. The goal of the United States should not be to try and shape an Arab world in the Western image of liberal democracy but to help Arab countries in the difficult task of realigning their stagnant political systems with changing socioeconomic realities. In some cases, this realignment might lead to greater democracy in the foreseeable future. In others, Western-style democracy may be too distant an idea to be worth discussing seriously at this time. Do we really know, for example, what the road to democracy might be in a country like the United Arab Emirates, where over 85 percent of the population is made up of noncitizens? What would participation mean if only present citizens participated? Conversely, how could a country absorb such a high proportion of diverse new citizens and maintain a sense of common identity?

The immediate issue in most Arab countries is not democracy, but an effective political system that can meet the challenge of change rather than simply repress manifestations of discontent and maintain control at all costs. Most Arab regimes do not sit easily on their



societies at present, despite the continuing strength of their repressive apparatus. They do not know how to adapt to the rise of new political forces and new cultural trends—Saudi Arabia is talking about the need for “ideological security,” for example. This environment leads not only to repression but also to incapacity to devise long-term solutions. For Arab governments, for citizens, and for outsiders concerned about protecting their interests in such unstable conditions, the question is how to move forward at all. The demotion of democracy from an immediate, high-priority goal to a long-term prospect will undoubtedly be extremely frustrating for Arab citizens who

want democracy in their own countries and who organize and agitate to that end. There is no use pretending, however, that the United States is likely to go beyond encouraging carefully controlled change from the top in the foreseeable future.

Nevertheless, even within the limitations imposed by U.S. politics, the balance of forces in the Arab world, and international democratic backsliding, the United States can still play a useful role in steering reform in a positive direction. But this will require a number of changes in the U.S. approach:

- **First**, the United States needs to draw a clear distinction between regime change and democracy promotion. The forcible overthrow of a hostile regime may be necessary at times—this is not the place to discuss when this might be justified—but it should never be presented as an effort to promote democracy. Conflating regime change and democracy promotion is not only bad policy but also creates confusion and alarm among both Arab regimes fearful of U.S. intentions and reform advocates who do not see military intervention as an answer to their problems.
- **Second**, the United States should set modest goals for a limited number of countries and pursue them quietly—but not secretly. The most promising projects are those where the interests of the United States, of the regime, and of reform advocates overlap to some extent. For example, Egypt has practically destroyed all avenues for political participation outside the ruling party—most political organizations have been gutted and the Muslim Brotherhood is becoming disenchanted about democracy. A revival of political life would serve everybody’s interests by channeling Egypt’s growing social unrest in a constructive direction. A modest but useful goal for U.S. efforts could be to encourage revision of the

### MEPI “Success Stories”

- Increased the transparency of Lebanon’s historic elections in 2005 through targeted technical and material support to domestic monitoring organizations, voter education, journalists, and candidates.
- Provided support to over 2,000 domestic election monitors for Egypt’s first multi-candidate election.
- Supporting the only live satellite broadcasts of Arab parliamentary sessions.
- Supporting national and local political party organizations and their members in countries that will have new rounds of municipal and parliamentary elections in 2005–2007.
- Strengthening the role of civil society in the democratic process by facilitating dialogue among activists, NGOs, and foreign ministers at G8/BMENA meetings and by awarding more than 70 indigenous civil society organizations with direct grants.

<http://www.mepi.state.gov/c16050.htm> (April 18, 2008)

procedures for registering political parties, a first step toward a long-term goal of pluralistic politics. In countries of the Gulf that are struggling with the problem of how to handle their large and restive foreign labor force, the United States should help generate ideas on how to tackle this complicated issue in a way that maintains stability and also addresses a serious human rights issue.

- **Third**, the United States should address issues of political reform in all countries with more questions than answers. It should admit, for example, that while it can identify a more open process of party registration as a crucial step in normalizing political life in Egypt, the details of how this should be done are complex and need much discussion. To be sure, U.S. values and beliefs must determine the broad direction of any attempt to promote political reform: creating opportunities for citizen participation, improving human rights, and increasing transparency of government actions. But what does that mean in practice in specific countries? Rather than assuming it has all the answers, Washington should consult and listen before drawing its own conclusions about which changes it should support.
- **Finally**, the United States must take one step in the opposite direction to the less assertive posture that has been suggested here so far: It must be very clear in affirming its right to maintain contacts with the greatest possible number of political and civil society actors in all countries, because it cannot work effectively toward any type of political reform without understanding the actors. Washington should make it clear that contacts with the broadest possible range of political and civil society organizations are not a sign of support or a declaration of their legitimacy but the reflection of its need for knowledge.

Although the steps advocated here represent a retreat from the flamboyant rhetoric of the recent past, they are not a retreat from the

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promotion of political reform, which requires not words but consistent action. Democracy promotion in the Middle East has led to no positive results, while undermining U.S. credibility across the region. Neither incumbent regimes nor reform advocates believe any longer that the United States is seeking the democratic transformation of the region. Credibility will not be restored by new rhetoric but by consistent efforts to promote attainable goals. ■

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## RESOURCES

Visit [www.CarnegieEndowment.org/pubs](http://www.CarnegieEndowment.org/pubs) for these and other publications.

**Beyond the Façade: Political Reform in the Arab World**, Marina Ottaway, Julia Choucair-Vizoso eds. (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008)  
<[www.carnegieendowment.org/behindthefacade](http://www.carnegieendowment.org/behindthefacade)>.

**Uncharted Journey: Promoting Democracy in the Middle East**, Thomas Carothers, Marina Ottaway eds. (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005)  
<[www.carnegieendowment.org/unchartedjourney](http://www.carnegieendowment.org/unchartedjourney)>.

**Political Reform in the Middle East: Can the United States and Europe Work Together?**, Marina Ottaway, Amr Hamzawy, (Policy Outlook, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 2004)  
<<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/MarinaOutlookFinalDec04.pdf>>.

**Integrating Democracy Promotion Into U.S. Middle East Policy**, Michele Dunne (Carnegie Paper No. 50, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2004)  
<<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/CP50FINAL.pdf>>.

**Is Gradualism Possible? Choosing a Strategy for Promoting Democracy in the Middle East**, Thomas Carothers (Carnegie Paper No. 39, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2003) <<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/wp39.pdf>>.

**Democratic Mirage in the Middle East**, Thomas Carothers, Marina Ottaway, Amy Hawthorne, Daniel Brumberg (Policy Brief No. 20, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2002)  
<<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/Policybrief20.pdf>>.

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