

PolicyWatch #1294 : Special Forum Report

## **Promoting Arab Democracy (or Not): What the Past Should Tell Us about the Future (Part II)**

Featuring [Robert Satloff](#) , Kenneth Wollack, Lorne Craner, and Michael Mandelbaum  
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*On October 3, 2007, Robert Satloff, Kenneth Wollack, Lorne Craner, and Michael Mandelbaum addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Dr. Satloff is executive director of the Institute. Mr. Wollack is president of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs and chairman of the board for the U.S. Committee for the UN Development Program. Mr. Craner is president of the International Republican Institute and former assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights, and labor. Dr. Mandelbaum is director of the American foreign policy program at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. J. Scott Carpenter addressed the forum as well; his remarks were published as [Part I](#) of this article. The following is a rapporteur's summary of the rest of the forum.*

### **ROBERT SATLOFF**

The Washington Institute is proud to launch [Project Fikra](#), a new initiative to counter Middle Eastern extremism. Fikra, which means "idea" in Arabic, will build networks for liberals and moderates, forge links with women and youths, and feature innovative research to counteract radical ideologies. J. Scott Carpenter, former deputy assistant secretary of state in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, will head the project, thanks to the generous support of the Keston family. This Policy Forum, the initial event of Project Fikra, looks at one of the key areas the project will explore, namely, democracy promotion in the Middle East, which was once a priority of the Bush administration.

### **KENNETH WOLLACK**

Perhaps a more appropriate title for this event would be "Responding to Arab Democracy," because democracy is an increasingly common demand and subject of dialogue in Middle Eastern societies. Kuwaiti women now have the right to vote, Saudi women are seeking expanded rights, and Yemen is leading an investigation into corruption -- all clear signals that grassroots democracy movements are gaining traction. Where reform efforts used to be insincere in place such as Bahrain, Lebanon, and Yemen, recent change has demonstrated that reform is now real. Across the region, election monitoring is now common and has made a difference; for instance, it has helped create more accurate statistics in Egypt about electoral turnout. When viewed as a two-to-three-decade project, Middle Eastern democracy promotion efforts are doing well.

The European Union, UN, and groups in the United States are all invested in facilitating democracy's advance in the region. Their involvement, along with the rise of internet news and instant reporting, has helped hold Middle Eastern governments accountable for their actions, which are now measured against the policy standards of democratic countries.

Recent elections have shown that democracy does not necessarily mean victory for radical Islamists. When Islamist parties perform well in elections, it is not because of any unique attributes on their part, but rather because they are better at rallying support. Such parties are now more willing to engage in the democratic

process and participate fairly. For instance, in Morocco's recent elections, the Party for Justice and Development came in second place and has been welcomed into a steadily liberalizing political system. Hamas's victory in the January 2006 Palestinian elections is reason for concern, but fewer Palestinians support Hamas now than two years ago. Moreover, countries that hold repeated elections have often moderated their political discourse. In Turkey, the pro-Western Justice and Development Party (AKP), although Islamist, opposes establishing Islam as a state religion.

Democracy theorists used to argue that South America, Asia, and Africa were unsuitable for democracy. But history has proven them wrong. The most useful debate is therefore not whether democracy will come to the Middle East, but whether we should promote a narrow, U.S. view of democracy or acknowledge alternative, Middle Eastern versions.

## **LORNE CRANER**

Many Middle Easterners perceive democratization as part of President Bush's agenda for Iraq, imposed at bayonet point. Skeptics also argue that democracy must be preceded by a free market economy and a strong middle class, or else must be imposed militarily. In reality, however, locals rightly claim credit for successes that were only partially supported from abroad. Moreover, as Fareed Zakaria has said, elections do not by themselves equal democracy. Rather, democratization efforts must include assistance to civil society, minorities, and women as a way to facilitate long-term democratic goals.

After the September 11 attacks, the notion of engaging in human rights and democratization efforts in the Middle East was put into question. But it was soon clear that doing so would be in Washington's best interests. Arab rulers and their inner circles took offense at President Bush's talk of democratization, but this was expected, as democracy runs counter to their power structures. Dictators used to say that the United States had a choice between supporting their regimes or watching their countries fall to the communists. Today, it seems to be a choice between dictators and Islamists. But Islamist parties like Hamas win elections through their political savvy, not their ideology. The Islamist threat should not prevent democracy promotion.

Washington should preserve and improve some of its policies that have fostered democracy in Oman, Morocco, and Qatar. Meanwhile, as in other regions, Washington should maintain good relations with Middle Eastern rulers while also pushing for political liberalization by working with local and American nongovernmental organizations. In addition, the United States should provide support for local dissidents in order to encourage the sort of constructive criticism that later leads to change. Finally, the United States should work more multilaterally and understand that its model of democracy is not transferable to every country.

## **MICHAEL MANDELBAUM**

Democracy today is a combination of two elements: popular sovereignty and liberty. This view of democracy as a hybrid system has two main consequences. First, elections are not sufficient because an elected group that fails to embrace liberty is not democratic. Second, democracy requires institutions, skilled people, and the diffusion of democratic values; in other words, to be successful, democracy must be homegrown.

Democracy is the world's most common form of government, and worldwide demand for it springs from the success of nations like the United States and Britain. But wanting democracy is not enough; a free market economy must precede it. As Jeremy Bentham noted, private property necessitates the rule of law. The economic liberty found in free market economies creates habits such as cooperation, tolerance, trust, and compromise -- values that are transferable to democracy. Because flourishing market economies are a rarity in the Middle East, the region is missing a crucial component of democracy.

Oil is another factor that inhibits democracy in the region, since oil-rich countries have no need of a free market economy. In addition, the ethnic and religious plurality of Middle Eastern countries hinders

democracy. Majority rule requires the trust of minorities -- something currently missing from the Middle East. There are democrats in the region, but many of them are expatriates. Nevertheless, the world's 120 democracies stand as an enduring example for the Middle East.

To further democracy promotion in the region, the United States should raise its gasoline tax to the same level as that of Europe and Japan. Despite the difficulty of such a measure, enacting it would reduce revenues for oil-rich states and could help promote free market economies in those countries. If Washington had used the post-September 11 political atmosphere to take this step, Middle Eastern democracy would be far more developed than it is now.

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