



EVALUATING MIDDLE EAST REFORM: SIGNIFICANT OR COSMETIC?

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Are Arab countries reforming politically? Are they becoming more democratic? Can they be helped, or coerced, from the outside to open up their political systems and become more democratic?

Such questions have received ample attention from policy makers and analysts in recent years. Two factors in particular served as catalysts for this unprecedented level of interest in political reform and democracy in the Arab world. The first was the publication of the first United Nations Development Program (UNDP) *Arab Human Development Report* in 2002, which pointed to the existence of a “democratic deficit” in Arab countries.¹ Although the report was not particularly original in its diagnosis and reflected ideas that had long been discussed among Arab intellectuals and foreign scholars, its publication by the UNDP moved discussions of the problem from the halls of academia to the pages of newspapers. The report was not welcomed by all and in fact inspired resentment on the part of many Arab governments, but it could not be ignored.

The second factor that intensified discussions about Arab political reform and democracy was the change in U.S. policy toward the Middle East triggered by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The attacks forced the Bush administration to focus on the threat posed by radical organizations that used Islam as their political ideology. These groups were already well known among specialists and policy makers. Until September 11, however, this threat had not come to the attention of the general public, nor was it a major determinant of U.S. policy in the region.

The September 11 drama prompted rethinking in U.S. policy where earlier intelligence reports and security estimates had not. That the hijackers came

predominantly from Saudi Arabia, a country long viewed as a reliable U.S. ally, was particularly shocking. It suggested at the very least that the Saudi royal family was not as firmly in control as it had been in the past. At worst, it raised questions concerning whether the Saudi government's policies were directly or indirectly the cause of terrorism. Questions of Saudi involvement led to finger pointing, ranging from accusations of lax control over Wahhabi religious organizations and the activities they funded in other Muslim countries to outright accusations that the Saudi government encouraged Islamist extremism. The explanation eventually embraced by the Bush administration was less harsh. The Saudi government was responsible for the rise of terrorist organizations in the Kingdom not because it directly supported such groups, but because its authoritarianism and its poor economic policies were creating social conditions that favored the growth of terrorism. Lack of democracy and economic opportunities among young Saudis caused frustration that manifested itself in the form of terrorist activities. Other Arab authoritarians were creating similar conditions in their countries. To contain terrorism the United States needed not only to rely on good intelligence and security measures but also to address the root causes of the problem by promoting democracy and economic reform. Thus was born the Bush administration's "freedom agenda" for the Middle East.

The U.S. decision to promote democracy in the Middle East in turn intensified long-standing debates about democracy among Arab intellectuals. Many reacted with indignation at the arrogance with which the Bush administration tried to impose political choices on Arab countries and questioned the United States' moral authority to do so. Although objecting to U.S. policy, a large number of intellectuals, however, agreed that Arab countries needed to put their political houses in order and that democracy should not be rejected just because the United States was proposing it.

Most important, some governments started responding to U.S. criticism by taking steps toward political reform. But how important are these changes? Are they meaningful reforms, as the governments claim, or are they simply placebos offered by authoritarian regimes in an attempt to pacify domestic and international public opinion, as the opposition often argues? In other words, are the reforms significant or cosmetic? If the reforms introduced so far are not significant, what steps would be? Can the international community help make them more significant? Answering these questions is a demanding task because what constitutes significant rather than cosmetic change varies from country to country depending on the prevalent conditions and past experiences. It is also an important task not only in trying to assess the sig-

nificance of the change taking place but also in helping policy makers focus their efforts.

“Significant” reform does not mean perfect reform. The goal of the essays in this book is not to provide a list of all the changes that each country would have to introduce to become a full-fledged democracy. Such an endeavor would be easy but essentially futile. A list of such changes could be readily derived from any textbook that discusses the characteristics of democratic systems. But we know that the process of democratization is slow and quirky—even a country that eventually democratizes successfully will follow a convoluted path. The challenge is thus not to describe a perfect process that will almost certainly not take place, but to distinguish partial steps that start altering the distribution of power and the character of the political system from those that are only window dressing.

The following discussion seeks to suggest parameters by which the significance of reforms can be judged, thus providing the conceptual framework for the case studies that follow.

A History of Change

Most Middle Eastern countries have a long history of political change, including at times democratic reform. Egypt and to a lesser extent Syria experienced promising periods of democratic opening before World War II. Most of the independence movements in the region incorporated democratic demands in their agenda. Although the 1950s and 1960s saw the triumph of Arab nationalism in most countries outside the Gulf—leading to the imposition of single party systems in many—the following decades witnessed a slow return to more pluralistic political systems in most countries.

During the 1990s, however, Arab political systems remained stagnant, seemingly untouched by the wave of change that swept across much of the world after the fall of socialist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. After sitting out the first period of reform after the end of the Cold War, many Arab countries paradoxically started opening up to the possibility of political change in the late 1990s when doors were closing elsewhere. There is a lot of debate about the reasons for this new political vitality, particularly the relative importance of domestic factors and outside pressure, but the change is undeniable.

There is a new willingness on the part of most Arab governments to admit that some political change is needed. Even the most conservative among them are willing to say that Arab countries are bound to evolve politically, although

in their own fashion and at their own pace. Arab intellectuals are speaking up about the need for change more openly than before, although it is not clear whether the spirited discussions taking place reach a broader and more mainstream audience than in the past. Debates about reform and democracy have become a growth industry in the Arab press. Democratic manifestos have been issued in rapid succession at meetings of civil society organizations, business groups, and even governments, creating a new and confusing array of declarations—the Sanaa Declaration, the Alexandria Declaration, and the Beirut Declaration are only some of a long list of new democratic manifestos.

The concrete steps taken by Arab governments to reform their political systems do not come even remotely close to matching the rhetoric. Many of the signatories of the eloquent declarations issued by “civil society” are not organizations but individuals who work for or with the same governments they supposedly want to reform. Intellectuals engaging in the debate over democracy in the press are careful not to cross redlines that would bring down the ire of intolerant regimes upon them. Concrete change, in other words, remains limited at best. Furthermore, it is already clear that the process of change will not be linear. In some countries, particularly in Egypt, reverse trends toward greater authoritarianism are beginning to appear.

These contradictory trends make it difficult for analysts to judge the real extent of change in the region. Are Middle Eastern countries experiencing the beginning of a real process of transformation that may lead to the emergence of democratic systems in a region hitherto known for its authoritarianism or semiauthoritarianism? Or is all the talk a smokescreen to hide political stagnation, and are the modest steps taken by some governments simply cosmetic reforms that produce the impression of change without actually altering the lopsided distribution of power to which Arab regimes owe their longevity?

The answers given to these questions from various quarters are usually more influenced by politics than rigorous analysis. Many Arabs chafing under the control of unpopular regimes tend to dismiss all changes as purely cosmetic, and they resent the approval expressed by Western governments and organizations for the steps enacted by Arab regimes. Regime supporters portray even modest measures as momentous indications of change, as does the Bush administration, anxious to convince the American public that its policies are working and that U.S. pressure is turning the Middle East into a more democratic region that is less of a danger to the United States.

A more balanced, less political appraisal of the significance of reform measures being enacted by Middle East regimes can be reached by addressing two

issues: First, what is the difference between significant and cosmetic reform in general? And second, how is it possible to ascertain in practice whether specific steps undertaken by a government or by the opposition are significant components of a process of democratization or merely cosmetic measures?

The Democratization Conundrum

What makes it difficult to assess the significance of the reforms being enacted is that democratization is not an event but a process, usually quite lengthy—President Bush has described it in various speeches as a generational task. Even in retrospect, it is not always clear when and how the process started in a given region or country. When did the process of democratization start in the old democracies of Europe? With the signing of the Magna Carta? With the enclosure movement in Great Britain? With the French Revolution? Or did it begin when the voting franchise was extended beyond the narrow limits of the landowning class? And when did the United States become a democratic country? Volumes continue to be written on such issues.

Even more recent and seemingly clear-cut examples, such as the transformation of Central Europe in the late 1980s and 1990s, are not so simple. The fall of the Berlin Wall or the surge of crowds in Wenceslas Square in Prague were undoubtedly turning points, but they were not a beginning, because much had happened before. Furthermore, the beginning of a process of democratization is not always followed by success. Thus, democratization may start with seemingly insignificant changes, while apparently significant changes may not lead anywhere.

The processes of gradual democratization are particularly difficult to analyze. In the case of Mexico, some analysts have chosen to interpret the transfer of power from the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) as the final outcome of a slow process of transformation that started in the early part of the twentieth century. The change, however, could just as plausibly be read as the result of a much more recent process triggered by the worldwide changes of the 1990s.

It is also clear from even the most superficial analysis that countries democratize in different ways: some more gradually, some suddenly; some as the result of deep socioeconomic change, others as the result of political upheaval. There may be some similarities in the final stages of the transformation in some countries, but there is certainly no universal pattern. Efforts to impose a standardized template on democracy promotion efforts during the 1990s have made this clear. The standardized models are more useful in

helping democracy promoters organize and justify their interventions than in understanding how and why countries do or do not become democratic.

Nor can the significance of specific reforms be judged on the basis of whether they are found in a checklist of the characteristics of a democratic system. The regular holding of multiparty elections, for example, is indisputably one characteristic of a democratic system, but plenty of countries have learned the art of holding multiparty elections without allowing a real challenge to the incumbent government. Such elections are not a sign of democratization. Equal rights for all citizens, including women, are basic to the definition of a democratic system. Again, it is possible for an intelligent authoritarian to make concessions on women's rights without bringing the country closer to democracy. In other words, we cannot judge the significance of reforms by juxtaposing them with a checklist of what a democratic country must have. This is true both because countries can make a lot of progress toward democracy without scoring well on the checklist for a long time—the United States, for example, had moved far along the road to democracy before equal rights legislation was proposed—and because seemingly important reforms can be meaningless in the wrong context.

It is particularly important not to confuse all positive change taking place in a country with democratization. Economic reform does not automatically lead to democratization, and countries with abundant state control of and interference with the market can be democratic, as the history of Western Europe after World War II shows. More recently, China has introduced breathtaking economic reforms without moving significantly in the direction of democracy. Singapore has educated its population, created a legal environment favorable to investment, and introduced many other positive changes thought to be conducive to democracy, but it is not moving toward democracy. Indonesia, in contrast, has seen some real change in the political realm in a socioeconomic environment that, by frequently used standards, is extremely unfavorable. Positive change can occur on many different fronts without democratization, and there can be democratization while other conditions are poor.

The Idea of Paradigm Shift

One way to approach the difficult problem of differentiating between significant and cosmetic reform is to borrow the concept of a paradigm shift from the world of the natural sciences. Thomas Kuhn has argued that major scientific advances are the result not of cumulative incremental change but of

scientific revolutions that lead scientists to abandon fundamental assumptions underlying their former work and to adopt a new paradigm, or set of assumptions, that looks at phenomena in a different light. It is these paradigm shifts that allow major progress to be made in the natural sciences.

In the same way, the transition from an authoritarian to a democratic system requires a political paradigm shift, an abandoning by those controlling the government, and often also by their opponents, of old assumptions about the fundamental organization of the polity, the relation between the government and the citizens, and thus the source, distribution, and exercise of political power. Paradigm shifts do not always lead to democracy. The Russian Revolution entailed a paradigm shift with worldwide implications, but it was most certainly not a shift toward democracy. Former Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Free Officers brought about a political paradigm shift in Egypt that had repercussions throughout the Arab world, but again democracy was not part of this shift. Yet while there can be and have been paradigm shifts without democracy, there can be no democracy without a preceding paradigm shift.

Absent such a paradigm change, a country can still show some progress toward a less repressive political system without making real progress toward democracy. An authoritarian regime can become more benevolent—for example, by avoiding the most extreme forms of repression (often because the regime concludes that such measures are counterproductive). A government may even liberalize a little, for example, by permitting limited criticism of high officials in the press. As long as these changes are benevolent acts of the ruler rather than the recognition of inalienable political rights of the citizens, no paradigm shift has taken place. The wave of post–Cold War political transitions provides numerous examples of political reforms without paradigm shift, leading to the rise of semiauthoritarian regimes.

The idea of a paradigm shift as the central element of the process of democratization is rather different from the usual concept of how transitions occur offered by students of democratization and adopted by democracy promoters. In the more common approach, democratization is seen as a three-phase process: a period of liberalization, followed by a transition represented by the holding of competitive multiparty elections, followed finally by a prolonged period of democratic consolidation. The problem with this conceptualization of the process of democratization is that many countries experience a period of liberalization and hold competitive elections without truly democratizing. They erect the façade of democracy but not the building behind it, and become what I have called elsewhere semiauthoritarian coun-

tries. These countries have not experienced a paradigm shift but have simply superimposed the formal processes expected by the international community on the old assumptions about how power is generated and exercised.

What leads to political paradigm shifts? In the Middle East, the dominant assumption is that only incumbent regimes have the power to launch a meaningful reform process. The assumption is widely shared by Arab governmental and nongovernmental elites as well as important segments of the public. It is also eagerly embraced by outsiders who want to promote democracy without risking destabilization, including U.S. government agencies and nongovernmental organizations. On the part of Arab groups, the assumption is based on a mixture of political prudence and cultural traits. People who live in authoritarian countries have, by definition, little experience with grassroots organizing and are used to seeing the government as the source of all problems and all solutions. Although most Arab countries have known periods of some political openness and, outside the Gulf states, have some experience with democratization, citizens tend to look to the authorities for solutions; those who do not are more likely to advocate violent, radical change rather than incremental reform. But the focus on change from the top is also the result of political expediency for many Arabs, as it is for many Westerners. Change from the top protects the interests of citizens for whom the status quo is morally reprehensible but materially safe and even rewarding. Change from the top also safeguards the interests of foreign countries that are concerned about stability and advocate democracy not as a means to bring about sweeping change, which can be dangerous, but as a means to create mildly reformist regimes deemed to be more flexible and thus more stable than authoritarian ones.

The focus on reforms introduced by the government is justified by the understanding that, ultimately, a change in the political paradigm of a country requires action by the government, whether the old or the new one, because it is the government that can change the rules of the political game and enact a new system. Even in the rare cases where political change takes a revolutionary form, the new system is established by those who seized control of the state, and thus control of governing. But political change that affects the distribution of power in a country rarely comes solely at the initiative of the government—from the top down—without any prompting. Reform is usually a response to pressures within the society that make change imperative. In assessing the significance of the changes taking place in a country, it is thus important to look not only at the initiatives taken by the government but also at actions by nongovernmental actors, such as political parties, civic organi-

zations, social movements, and labor unions, that may affect the balance of power and put real pressure on the government to reform. Not all steps taken by such independent organizations are significant in terms of democratic change; there are cosmetic activities here as well. The growth of political parties with a large membership is undoubtedly a significant change. The signing of a democracy manifesto by a small number of intellectuals is a cosmetic though morally gratifying step, unlikely to trigger a political paradigm shift.

Until the end of the Cold War, and even more recently in the Middle East, a discussion of reform from the top and pressure from below would have exhausted the possibilities about the sources of paradigm change. At present, with the issue of political reform in the Arab world high on the agenda of the United States and the European Union, the question also needs to be asked whether a political paradigm change can result from external pressure. Events of the last few years show that external pressure can easily trigger cosmetic reform. Many Arab regimes have been quite responsive to U.S. pressure. For example, several countries have tried to refurbish their reformist credentials by amending family codes to improve the rights of women or by appointing women to important, visible positions. Some are experimenting with elections, at least local ones, although usually in such a way that makes it extremely unlikely, if not outright impossible, for candidates or parties hostile to the government in power to acquire control.

What we have not witnessed so far is any example of outside pressure convincing the incumbent government to expose itself to competition that might result in its ouster from power. Nor is it clear whether the United States and other outsiders pushing for reform really want to see the enactment of measures that could lead to a political paradigm change with unforeseeable consequences. Modest, even cosmetic, change often accommodates the political requirements of both incumbent governments and outsiders better than far-reaching measures with unpredictable consequences.

Assessing the Significance of Reforms

Defining reforms that could lead to paradigm shifts as significant and those that do not as cosmetic does not answer the question of how to distinguish between the two in practice. Several problems arise in judging the significance of reforms in practice.

The first is the time frame. Reforms should be judged on the basis of the likelihood that they will make a difference in a relatively short period of time. It is true that democratization is a long process, and that democratic consol-

idation takes decades at best. But in judging the significance of specific steps supposedly taken by governments or opposition groups to facilitate democratization, it is necessary to use a much shorter time frame. Presumably, if a government is committed to democratic change, it will take steps that have an effect in the short run, not in the distant future. Although any precise number will be arbitrary, reforms that are not likely to have an impact within five years should not be considered significant. For example, the amendment of a party registration law that may have an impact on elections scheduled four or five years in the future should be considered significant because it could contribute to change in the distribution of power, and thus to paradigm change, in the foreseeable future. But the appointment of younger ministers or the promotion of younger officials to high positions in a ruling party cannot be considered a significant sign of change solely because it indicates the rise of a new generation that at some point might take it upon itself to reform the system. The time frame is simply too long, and the supposed process of generational change too vague to see such appointments and promotions as indications that change is indeed underway.

The second problem is whether a measure has a direct impact on political reform or whether it would become significant only if all parts of a chain of events fell into place. For example, the lifting of emergency laws to free up political activity is undoubtedly a significant reform by the government, and the formation of a coalition of political parties a significant step taken by the opposition. Both could lead to a paradigm shift in the foreseeable future. The privatization of state industry, however, cannot be considered significant from the point of view of political paradigm shift because the political impact of such a measure would at best be indirect and contingent on many other pieces falling into place. If privatization were honestly conducted and led to real economic growth, if economic growth were of such a nature that it facilitated the formation of a large middle class rather than the emergence of a small number of robber barons, and if the process continued long enough, a political paradigm shift could develop in the end. But there are too many uncertainties and contingencies in the chain to allow the analyst to define privatization as a significant step toward political paradigm change.

Finally, there is the problem of unintended consequences and the “slippery slope.” Reform processes that start out as limited and carefully orchestrated from the top may have unintended consequences leading to a paradigm shift at some point. The repression of the Prague Spring in 1968 triggered a series of reactions that are indirectly connected to the velvet revolution of 1989. Yet, it would make little sense to see the repression of the Prague Spring as the

beginning of democratization in Czechoslovakia. Again, there are too many contingencies and intervening variables in the slippery slope scenario.

To be sure, it is only in retrospect that it becomes truly clear whether or not reforms have led to paradigm change. The observer of contemporary phenomena has to be content with evaluating the potential for change, knowing full well that it will not be automatically realized. Furthermore, not all significant reforms are relevant to democratization. Reforms that could lead to democracy must favor the emergence of a political system that, following Robert Dahl's definition in *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, is responsive, or almost completely responsive, to its citizens, allowing them to formulate and express preferences.² Focusing on responsiveness rather than on institutional arrangements as the defining characteristic of a democracy makes it easier to separate changes that are steps toward democracy from those that are purely formal. For example, the question is not simply whether elections are held regularly, but whether such elections lead to the formation of responsive governments that are not all-powerful and are thus obliged to respond to their constituents' demands to remain in office.

Significant, political paradigm-changing democratic reforms are thus those that affect, or at least have the potential for affecting, the distribution of power in a country and make power subject to a popular mandate. Such reforms must contribute to limiting the power of the executive, allowing the emergence of other centers of power and introducing an element of pluralism. The countries of the Middle East at the present time are characterized by an extraordinary concentration of power in the hands of an executive—a king, a ruling family, a religious establishment, a strong president. This is the fundamental problem of democracy in the entire region. The only true exceptions at this point are Lebanon, where power is allocated—both constitutionally and in political reality—among different political institutions and religious communities, and Iraq, where U.S. intervention has destroyed the strongman paradigm, leaving no political system capable of generating power and creating a power vacuum, violence, and instability.

The changes in the distribution of power and thus in the responsiveness of the political system do not have to be complete or even particularly extensive for specific changes or reforms to be considered significant. Certainly, a new political paradigm does not have to be elaborated for change to be considered significant. Even in the natural sciences, the shift starts with the challenging of the old assumptions, not with the consolidation of a new model.

In conclusion, significant reforms are those that have the potential for leading to a democratic paradigm shift in a fairly short time period, without

the interference of a long chain of intervening variables that may or may not materialize, and equally without the interference of unforeseen circumstances. Although the possibility that a complex chain of events will lead to democratization cannot be ruled out, or that apparently insignificant change will put the country on a slippery slope toward major transformation, we cannot judge the significance of specific reforms by assuming that such a chain of events will unfold.

Significant reform can occur from the top down, if a government enacts measures that start breaking down its monopoly over power. Significant change can also occur from the bottom up, when strong new organizations with a political agenda form. Ideally, that political agenda should be a democratic one, but even the growth of a political organization with an agenda that falls short of democracy can be important in breaking down the power of the old regime. A country where a nondemocratic government is being challenged by other political forces, even if they do not embrace a democratic agenda, is closer to pluralism than one in which a government is unchallenged or challenged only weakly. Anything that leads to autonomous activities and organizing is part of the process of breaking down power at the core.

Even significant reforms, however, may not lead to a paradigm change and democratization. In assessing the significance of reforms, analysts cannot predict the ultimate outcome of a long-term process because too many new factors can intervene. Analysts can only try to ascertain whether the steps taken at a given time are significant and thus have the potential to contribute to democratization. Assessing present significance does not mean predicting future outcomes. For example, a constitutional amendment that increases the power of the parliament is a significant measure, although in the future its potential for changing the balance of power in the country may be voided by electoral maneuvering that ensures that the ruling party controls the overwhelming majority of the seats. The decision to allow political parties to register is significant, although there is no guarantee that those parties will succeed in developing strong constituencies. There is no guarantee that a reform introduced by the government, or an initiative introduced by independent organizations, will eventually lead to paradigm change but that does not mean that such reforms and initiatives should be dismissed as purely cosmetic changes.

Cosmetic reforms are measures that do not affect the distribution of power, do not make the government more open to challenges, and thus do not have the potential for leading directly to paradigm change. Furthermore, cosmetic reforms are deliberately designed to give the appearance of change while pre-

cluding its possibility. When a government decides to allow the election of half the members of parliament while maintaining the right to appoint the other half, it is carrying out a cosmetic reform.

Cosmetic reforms may be introduced more often in response to the pressure of the international community when domestic pressure is still limited. Confronted with the mobilization of significant domestic constituencies, governments are likely to either resort to repression or introduce significant change. It is the distant external actors who may be satisfied with façade changes.

Reform in Practice

The ten countries analyzed in this book are quite different from one another. Inevitably, so are the types of reforms their governments have introduced, the nature of the political actors involved, and the process that has determined the extent and type of change taking place. Together, the ten cases offer a broad, though not exhaustive, overview of the variety and complexity of the issues involved in a political reform process.

Political change has been pervasive in most of the countries studied in this volume. But change has not followed a clear direction, and progress toward greater openness has often been undone by reversals. Furthermore, in countries where the political space is more open now than it was even a few years ago—where debate is more lively and participation by citizens the highest—the changes stop well short of a paradigm change.

Morocco and Kuwait are the two most encouraging models of reform analyzed in the book, with a pluralistic and competitive process for electing parliament, lively media, public debates, and reasonable protection of individual rights and liberties, as illustrated by the studies of Marina Ottaway and Meredith Riley on Morocco and of Paul Salem on Kuwait. Yet in both countries the power of the executive remains disproportionately larger than that of other government branches, with the Moroccan king not subject to any constitutional limitations on his power and the Kuwaiti ruling family still fighting the authority of parliament.

Yemen, one of the least developed countries in the Middle East and North Africa region and thus one many analysts would expect to be quite resistant to political reform, also has a very active political scene, with an opposition willing to enter into cross-ideological alliances between Islamist and secular parties and a government that has made a conscious decision not to crush or eliminate some opposition groups even when it has been in a position to do

so. Nevertheless, the president and ruling party in Yemen maintain the ability to manipulate the system and avoid any true challenge to its power, as Sarah Phillips shows.

Egypt represents a much more disturbing case where promising advances toward a greater political openness and a more dynamic political system have been quickly reversed, as shown in the analyses by Michele Dunne and Amr Hamzawy. Egypt thus offers a stark reminder of the reversibility and uncertainties of reform processes.

Saudi Arabia demonstrates why political reform needs to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, keeping in mind the starting point and the overall context. It is easy to dismiss Saudi Arabia as a country where no political reform is taking place. Power is still firmly controlled and exercised within the labyrinthine confines of the royal family and the religious establishment, independent political and even civil organizations are nonexistent, and space for free political activities or even personal lifestyle choices is exceedingly limited. Yet Saudi Arabia should not be dismissed as an example of complete stagnation: Because the society has been so closely controlled, even small changes become significant, and Amr Hamzawy's analysis shows that many small changes are taking place.

Paradoxically, Jordan and Syria, studied by Julia Choucair-Vizoso and Ellen Lust-Okar, respectively, are in many ways politically more stagnant, although more open socially. They are neither moving toward greater openness and reform nor closing down the political space drastically. Rather, they appear to be drifting politically. Stagnation in both cases is explained not just by domestic factors but by the regional context as well.

Algeria, Lebanon, and Palestine have all experienced political ferment as well as violent turmoil. All three cases are extremely complex, and as a result they are often misrepresented. Algeria could certainly be analyzed, like many other countries, in terms of the relationship between government and opposition parties, the changing role of institutions, and the dynamics of political participation. But Hugh Roberts shows that the real story in Algeria is the struggle between military and civilian elites, which has resulted in greater power for civilian elites but not in a broadening of political participation. Julia Choucair-Vizoso shows that two parallel processes are unfolding in Lebanon as well. One is a battle for political reform—where issues such as reform of the electoral law and economic restructuring dominate—and the other is the continuation of the old strife among different confessional groups. The weight of the different issues is in constant flux, with the strife among confessional groups and their foreign allies most prominent in 2007. Similarly,

in Palestine, a relatively successful push to set up viable political institutions to control the territories and eventually a Palestinian state was ultimately defeated by fighting between Hamas and Fatah, each backed by its respective foreign allies. Reforms were remarkably successful, Nathan Brown shows, but in the end the process came to naught, destroyed by fighting between Hamas and Fatah.

Understanding the peculiarities of each country, the nature of their political players, and the processes through which they try to exert their influence is thus the first step toward evaluating the significance of the political changes taking place in the Arab world.

Taken together, the ten case studies also offer broader lessons that challenge facile assumptions about the process of democratic transformation and the role that outsiders can play in promoting them.

Notes

1. United Nations Development Program, *Arab Human Development Report 2002: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

2. Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972).