

Introduction

The New Democracy Imperative

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THE ISSUE OF DEMOCRACY in the Middle East has erupted in Western policy circles. U.S. officials, policy experts, and pundits, very few of whom gave the subject more than a passing thought in decades past, now heatedly and ceaselessly debate how democratic political change might occur in the region and whether the United States can help bring about such change. Similarly, in many European capitals the Middle East's potential democratic evolution is the subject of a rapidly growing number of meetings, conferences, and discussions in both governmental and non-governmental circles.

This new Western preoccupation with democracy in the Middle East has a clear source. The terrorist attacks against New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, threw into question a long-standing pillar of Western policy thinking in the region—the belief that the political stability offered by friendly Arab authoritarian regimes is a linchpin of Western security interests. In the process of post-September 11 review and reflection, many people in the U.S. and European policy communities reversed their previous outlook and now see the lack of democracy in the Middle East as one of the main causes of the rise of violent, anti-Western Islamic radicalism, and as such, a major security problem. And it follows directly from this conclusion that attempting to promote political reform and democratization in the region should be a policy priority—one of the key methods for eliminating the “roots of terrorism.” The new democracy imperative for the Middle East, at least on the part

of Western policy makers, is thus driven not by a trend toward reform in the region, but by the West's own security concerns.

To date the U.S. government's efforts to operationalize this newfound policy imperative have been extraordinarily controversial, above all because of the invasion of Iraq. Some of President George W. Bush's key foreign policy advisors believed that ousting Saddam Hussein would not only remove a leader they viewed as a grave threat to regional and indeed global security, but as important, it would also allow the establishment of a democratic government in the heart of the Arab world—a government that would serve as a powerfully positive model to other countries of the region, possibly even creating a regional wave of democracy.

In practice the Iraq intervention has not yet had clearcut positive results on the democracy front, and the prospects for a stable, well-functioning democracy in Iraq remain extremely uncertain. Iraq no longer suffers under Saddam Hussein's despotic rule, but the post-invasion period has been much more difficult than anticipated. There is as much discussion today of whether the unity of Iraq as a nation-state can be maintained as there is of the possibility that it will make a transition to democracy. Moreover, the invasion has inflamed Arab sentiments against the United States, strengthening the hand of Islamic radicals and complicating the life of pro-Western Arab democrats.

Yet the Iraq intervention by no means constitutes the sum total of the new U.S. push for democracy in the Middle East. In the last three years, the U.S. government has also initiated a broader, less aggressive range of measures to stimulate and support positive political change throughout the region. U.S. officials have been trying to craft an evolving mix of diplomatic carrots and sticks to encourage friendly and unfriendly regimes to carry out political reforms. The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) offers support for political, economic, and educational reforms and for improved women's rights in the region. The G-8 "Partnership for Progress and a Common Future" with the countries of the broader Middle East and North Africa (also known as the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative) provides a larger diplomatic framework for MEPI and various other related initiatives. The Bush administration has proposed widening free trade between Arab countries and has concluded free trade agreements with Bahrain and Morocco.

For those in the U.S. policy community who were sympathetic to the invasion of Iraq, these sorts of measures are a complement to the military-based regime-change side of the policy; they are the soft side of the new prodemocracy coin. Those who were not sympathetic to the invasion in Iraq, both within the government and in the broader policy community, hope that such measures can develop and cohere into an alternative policy line, a bipartisan, long-term response to the imperative for prodemocratic change in the Middle East. Unfortunately, many Arab policy experts and commentators, often following the lead of their governments, have treated the softer measures as an intrinsic part of the larger, military-oriented policy that they reject outright. They have thus often been hostile to measures that on their own might have commanded their support. Continued or even intensified Arab hostility to the U.S. approach to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict has only fueled that tendency.

Despite the keenly felt urgency of the prodemocracy policy imperative, this broader set of diplomatic and aid measures has gotten under way slowly. It was only in 2003 that U.S. democracy aid programs in the region really began multiplying. It was only in 2004 that senior U.S. officials began to deliver prodemocratic diplomatic messages privately and publicly to Arab counterparts on a somewhat consistent basis. The softer, longer-term side of the U.S. push for democracy in the Middle East is, at best, a work in progress. Its slow advance is in part due to the unfamiliar territory to be traversed and uncertainty about how to proceed. But it is also due to the fact that, as urgent and serious as the prodemocracy imperative appears to many in the U.S. policy community, the stubborn reality remains that the United States has other important security-related and economic interests, such as cooperation on antiterrorism enforcement actions and ensuring secure access to oil. Such interests impel it to maintain close ties with many of the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and to be wary of the possibility of rapid or unpredictable political change. Given the strength and persistence of these other interests, it is not clear whether the new prodemocracy impulse will result in a fundamental change of the long-standing U.S. support for authoritarian and semiauthoritarian friends in the region or simply end up as an attractive wrapping around a largely unchanged core.

European governments and policy communities are enmeshed in similar policy debates and dilemmas. They feel the same imperative regarding the need to promote political reform in the Middle East, although

they are somewhat less inclined than their U.S. counterparts to see a direct causal link between a possible advance of democracy in the Arab world and a decline in radical Islamist terrorism. Moreover, Europe has already been engaged for approximately a decade with much of the region in a broad initiative to stimulate both political and economic reform through the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (commonly known as the Barcelona Process).

Most European governments have been averse to the military-based regime-change side of the Bush administration's democracy project for the region. Even most of those that decided to participate in the Iraq intervention did so largely on the basis of the security rationale for the action, not the democracy side of it. Their efforts to support Middle East political reform are concentrated on the diplomatic and aid sides of the policy spectrum and emphasize the idea of positive sum partnerships between Arab and European governments. Generally speaking, the northern states of Europe, particularly the Nordic countries, Germany, and Great Britain, are giving somewhat more emphasis to the need for democratic political change in the region, whereas France, Italy, Spain, and the other southern states are more concerned with promoting economic growth that might reduce the flow of immigrants from the region. Like the United States, many European countries have multiple interests and agendas in the Middle East, and although democracy is one of them it has to compete with others. And some of these others, such as the need for a steady supply of Middle East oil, point strongly to the value of close cooperation with some of the nondemocratic regimes of the region.

Nature of the Challenge

Highlighting the vital Western security interests tied to the political future of the Middle East, some policy makers and commentators compare the challenge of promoting Arab democracy with the post-Cold War task of helping advance democracy in the former communist world. Despite what may seem to some the comparable magnitude or gravity of the two challenges, the comparison is misleading; significant differences distinguish the two cases. The wave of attempted democratic transitions that followed the end of the Cold War in the former communist

countries took place in a climate in which alternative ideologies to democracy played a limited role. Socialism had lost its appeal. Antidemocratic forms of nationalism still had some life left, but their full impact was only felt in the Balkans. In the Arab world, however, democracy still has to contend with political Islam, or Islamism, a mixture of politico-religious ideas that attract a mass following, have been growing in popularity, and relate uneasily to the ideals of liberal democracy.

In addition, the relationship between the United States and Europe on the one hand and the Arab world on the other is completely different from that which existed between the Western powers and the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies in the declining days of communism. The Warsaw Pact governments were hostile regimes that many Western governments actively hoped would fall, and the political opposition in those countries, and significant parts of the citizenry, were pro-American. In the Middle East, most of the governments are valued security and economic partners of the West. And significant parts of the political opposition to these governments, and in fact large parts of the citizenry, are anti-American.

Another major difference is the state of political change. In a trend that gathered force across the 1980s, the governments of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were buffeted by strong internal pressures for change. By the end of the decade they were collapsing and the region entered a period of profound political transformation, defined not just by the fall of the old systems but by the widespread desire, at least in Eastern Europe, to embrace democracy. The Middle East is in a fundamentally different state. The region has experienced mild liberalizing reforms and internal reform debates over the last fifteen years, at least in some countries. In the last several years this reform debate has intensified, driven both by the Arabs' own reflections on the lessons of September 11 and by the new talk about the need for democracy in the region coming out of Washington and other Western capitals. Yet, despite this heightened reform debate and some modest reform measures, the region remains politically stuck, with entrenched authoritarian or semiauthoritarian governments that are well versed in absorbing political reforms without changing the fundamental elements of power. Arab governments are still unwilling to take serious measures to head off the very worrisome longer-term signs of trouble, such as the rising socioeconomic pressures created by high population growth.

Of course a tremendous variation in the degree of political openness and reform characterizes the Middle East. Several countries, such as Libya, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Tunisia are highly authoritarian and allow almost no political space. Others, such as Morocco and Lebanon, hold regular elections that are largely free and fair, with diverse political parties taking part and significant amounts of political freedom. Other countries fall in between these two poles, with mixed amounts of political space and reform. Although a spectrum of political liberalization exists, actual democratization remains elusive. Some countries, particularly in the Gulf, are barely beginning to experiment with partially elected legislatures. Even the most advanced reformers have not opened up the main levers of political power to open political competition, levers that are held by either hereditary monarchs or strongman rulers backed by militaries and internal security forces that enjoy political impunity. Although the reform efforts in the region are diverse, they all fail to get at this central democratic deficit.

Critical Juncture

The above analysis highlights an interesting parallel between the state of Western policy toward the Middle East and the situation of Arab political reform—a parallel that frames what is clearly a critical juncture with regard to the possible democratic evolution of the region. The United States and Europe feel a new security imperative to push for political change in the Arab world and have set forth rhetoric announcing a new proreform policy line. Yet governments on both sides of the Atlantic are still struggling to operationalize the new commitment, to connect their new rhetoric to policy deeds. In somewhat similar fashion, in the Middle East debates about political reform have multiplied and taken on a freer, franker character. Yet, as with the new impulse in Western policy, there is a lot more talk about the necessity for change than action to bring it about.

In short, both democracy promotion by outsiders and democratization from the inside have arrived at a critical stage in the Middle East. They are recognized as imperatives, widely explored in discussions and debates, but only partially realized in practice. In both Western policy and Arab political life, moving toward realization of these imperatives

is hard both because of powerful vested interests that reinforce the status quo and because of a deeper uncertainty about how to proceed. Whether and how the tensions between the new imperatives and the underlying forces supporting the status quo are resolved is a major issue for the Middle East and for U.S. and European foreign policy for years to come.

Although extensive discussion and debate are necessary for the effort to move forward on these challenging issues, several elements of the current discussions and debates in both Western and Arab circles appear to be complicating the task. One such problematic element is the harsh politicization of the overall subject, principally arising from the war in Iraq. In the United States the question of whether and how to promote democracy in the Middle East has been badly tangled up in the divisive arguments over the legitimacy and wisdom of the war in Iraq. Many European policy experts shy away from explicit references to any democracy agenda, preferring much softer formulations about political reform out of a concern to avoid any association with the Iraq intervention. In the Middle East, the idea of a Western push for democracy in the region, and even the idea of liberal democracy itself, has become somewhat tainted by association with the highly unpopular intervention in Iraq.

Certainly the eventual political outcome in Iraq will have significant effects on politics in the rest of the region. But it is very unlikely that the United States, having experienced much higher human, financial, and diplomatic costs than expected in the Iraq intervention, will pursue military-based regime change in other countries in the region anytime soon. Future U.S. efforts to promote positive political change in the rest of the Middle East will very likely be a mix of diplomatic and aid measures. Thus it would be useful if it were possible to begin to separate the debates over the Iraq intervention from the broader consideration in both Western and Arab policy circles of how best the United States and Europe can be useful partners in supporting positive political change in the region. Yet given continued Arab anger over Iraq, such a separation will be hard to achieve in practice.

A second problematic element of the debates and discussions over democracy promotion and democratization in the region is the lack of available experience and expertise. The Arab world has largely stayed outside the democratic trend that passed through most other regions in

the past twenty-five years, which has meant that few Western experts on Arab politics have direct knowledge about democracy promotion methods and few Western experts on democracy promotion have much knowledge of Arab politics. In like fashion, concrete experience with both democratization and external democracy-promotion programs is in relatively short supply in the Arab world. Those lacunae in Western policy circles and Arab political life are starting to be filled as democracy-promotion efforts and political reform initiatives increase, but the supply of expertise is still well short of the demand.

One result of this shortfall is a strong tendency to reinvent the wheel and to ignore lessons from the experience of democracy building in other regions. An example in this regard is the enthusiasm that some U.S. and European democracy promoters have shown for civil society support in the Arab world as a key method of democracy building. The unfulfilled expectations that democracy promoters have experienced in other regions with regard to the hoped-for transformative effect of aiding Western-style advocacy nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) seem not to be taken into account by some of those who rush to embrace the civil society cause in the Middle East.

Another consequence of the shortage of experience and expertise in democracy promotion in the Arab world is that the new community of enthusiasts of such work frequently evidences unrealistic ideas about how much impact outside actors can expect to have when they try to alter the political direction of other societies. Some people appear to believe that if enough people in Washington decide the Middle East needs to become democratic, democratization will happen, just by the force of the American will alone. Yet the most basic, consistent lesson coming out of the experience of democracy promotion in other regions is that external actors, even very determined ones employing significant resources, rarely have a decisive impact on the political direction of other societies.

A third limiting feature of the ongoing debates and discussions over the issue of democracy in the Middle East is a surprising lack of attention to the core question of what a path to democracy might actually consist of in specific Arab countries. Although both Western and Arab policy experts and commentators say much about the need for democracy in the region, they are surprisingly vague about how they expect it to come about. They emphasize reform led from the top, and the implicit model is a process of gradual reform that takes a country from

authoritarian rule through liberalization to democracy without any sharp junctions along the way. Yet in the parts of the world that have experienced democratization in the past twenty-five years, the most common pattern has been a rather dramatic collapse of authoritarian rule and at least some short-term political dislocation while a new pluralistic system is constructed. Incremental, top-down processes of democratization have been rare. This does not mean that democratization in the Middle East would necessarily have to entail political chaos or violent instability, but any assumption that one modest, incremental top-down reform after another will somehow result in deep-reaching political transformation is rooted more in hope than actual experience.

Dilemmas and Choices

The chapters in this book seek to provide insights into the core questions about the challenges of promoting democracy in the Middle East, with the intention of helping advance the ongoing discussion and debates on the subject past some of the deficits outlined above. The chapters are diverse and do not reflect any one view of how Western policy makers and aid providers should proceed. However, they share a general sympathy for the idea that U.S. and European policy should take very seriously the imperative of attempting to support positive political change in the region. They also share the overarching belief that there are no magic bullets of democracy promotion and that the experience of democracy promotion in other regions makes clear a strong need for humility and patience.

The first group of chapters, by Daniel Brumberg, Graham Fuller, and Amy Hawthorne, under the heading “Regional Realities,” takes the measure of the current state of Arab politics. It does not attempt a comprehensive survey but rather focuses on several key questions. First, what is the difference between liberalization and democratization, and how do Arab political reforms of the past two decades fit into these two different patterns? Second, what are Islamists’ political goals and to what extent are they likely to contribute to or impede democratization? And third, how significant is the new, post-September 11 reform ferment in the Arab world? Do the new debates on reform and the reform measures taken by some Arab governments constitute a potential breakthrough for Arab democracy?

The next section, titled “No Easy Answers,” with chapters by Amy Hawthorne, Marina Ottaway, and Eva Bellin, explores some of the dilemmas and difficulties that arise in different approaches to supporting reform. The first chapter in this section asks whether civil society promotion could or should serve as the main thrust of democracy-promotion efforts, as some democracy promoters believe. The second takes up an equally challenging question, that of whether promoting women’s rights in the Arab world is a fruitful method for promoting Arab democracy. The third tackles the much-debated issue of the likely or ideal relationship between economic and political reform in the Arab world. And the fourth probes the troubling absence of mass-based constituencies for democratic change in the Middle East and looks for possible future sources of such constituencies.

The next section, “Policy Choices,” with chapters by Marina Ottaway, Thomas Carothers, Michele Dunne, and Richard Youngs, analyzes some of the key choices that Western policy makers and aid practitioners face in attempting to institutionalize a policy of support for democracy in the Middle East. The first chapter in the section emphasizes the problem of credibility that dogs all U.S. efforts in the democracy-promotion realm. The second questions whether Western democracy promoters have really come to terms with the need to choose a strategy of democracy promotion and outlines the available options. The third makes the case for how the United States can better integrate democracy concerns into its overall policy for the region. And the fourth looks at Europe’s past and present efforts to support Middle Eastern reform, focusing on the common elements of the varied European efforts, as well as their shortcomings.

The final section, “Conclusion,” by Marina Ottaway and Thomas Carothers, highlights how the United States and other countries interested in supporting positive political change in the Middle East can start dealing with the problem of credibility and with the complexities of Arab politics that make democracy promotion especially challenging. It emphasizes the need to get to the core issues at stake, above all building constituencies for democratic change and broadening political contestation. The section also stresses the need to calibrate expectations about the pace of political change and the impact of external actors in the Middle East to a level corresponding to the experience of other regions where similar democracy promotion efforts have been made.