WORKING
P A P E R S

Understanding Arab Political Reform

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About the Author

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OVERVIEW

No American administration has talked more about democracy in the Middle East than the Bush administration. The president and his advisors have spoken optimistically about a post-Saddam democracy in Iraq, one that might eventually become a veritable light to other Arab nations. This grand vision assumes that sooner or later, advocates of democracy throughout the Middle East will demand the same freedoms and rights that Iraqis are now claiming. Yet, however inspiring this vision appears, the actual reform plan that the administration has thus far set out is unlikely to produce radical changes in the Arab world. As Secretary of State Colin Powell suggested in his November 2002 "Middle East Partnership Initiative," and in the subsequent statement he gave to the Arab press, the United States will work with Arab leaders to carefully and slowly reform their autocracies. Regardless how dramatic the change in Baghdad is, when it comes to our friends in Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, and Yemen, the administration's reform plan points to evolution rather than revolution.

Is this gradualist approach the right remedy? And, if not, should the United States press for the grander vision of radical change some in the administration advocate? Before we can even begin to answer these questions, before we write out the prescription, we must carefully examine the patient. We need to understand how Arab autocracies actually work, and, in particular, how the "liberalized autocracies" of the region endure despite frequent prediction of their imminent death. Such regimes do not conform to the American media's portrayal of Arab politics. When we think of the region, we usually envision dictatorships or, as I prefer to call them, "full autocracies." Such regimes have zero tolerance for free debate or competitive politics. Indeed, in full autocracies dissent warrants jail, or worse, execution. By contrast, the liberal autocracies of the Arab world temper authoritarianism with pluralism. They are liberal in the sense that their leaders not only tolerate but promote a measure of political openness in civil society, in the press, and even in the electoral system of their country. Elections give opposition leaders a chance to compete, to enter parliaments, and, what is more, occasionally to serve as ministers. But they are autocratic in that their rulers always retain the upper hand. They control the security establishment, dominate the media, and dole out economic goodies to their favorite clients. With their ultimate reliance on the supreme authority of the monarch or president, liberalized autocracies provide a kind of virtual democracy.

It is far from clear how to reform liberalized autocracies, given their multifaceted and ambiguous nature, and given how deeply entrenched they are. Encouraging rapid change, such as completely free elections, might invite radical forces and even a retreat to full autocracy. Arab leaders—many of whom will remain our allies for the foreseeable future—are not about to commit political suicide. But a go-slow approach also has drawbacks. Among these, the most corrosive is the tendency of liberalized autocracies to hang onto power without developing representative institutions that have wide popular support or legitimacy. After all, their very survival hinges on not allowing for the

emergence of effective party systems or truly representative parliaments. For this reason, little might be gained by an incrementalist strategy that offers few incentives for Arab leaders to move beyond the politics of day-to-day survival. As the United States moves beyond the war in Iraq, it will quickly discover that promoting reforms in the liberalized autocracies of the Arab world poses dilemmas for which there are no easy answers.

FULL VERSUS LIBERALIZED AUTOCRACY: POLITICAL SURVIVAL IN THE MIDDLE EAST

At the end of the day, all autocrats want to survive. But how they survive makes a difference. The full autocracies of the Arab world—which include Syria, Tunisia, Libya, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia—survive by relying on two mechanisms: the provision of jobs and economic benefits in return for political support, and the use of shear force and intimidation. Regimes use these instruments to isolate, silence, or repress almost all contending forces outside the ruling circle. Liberalized autocracies also use money and intimidation to both coopt and repress potential opponents. But, unlike full autocracies, they have a fairly high threshold of tolerance for political openness. For full autocracies, any political change is a slippery slope into self-destruction, while for liberalized autocracies, state-controlled political change is necessary for survival. Why does the first fear reform while the second tolerates and even invites it?

At least three factors explain why leaders of full autocracies dread reform. First, Syria, Iraq, Libya, and to a lesser extent Saudi Arabia boast extensive security apparatus whose very existence depends on the regime's direct or indirect control over the economy. Since the slightest opening might deprive the most powerful members of the ruling establishment of their hard-earned booty, there are few (if any) leaders in full autocracies willing to risk political reform. Second, having failed to create truly representative institutions, the leaders of full autocracies are not well placed to create effective alternatives to sheer repression. For them, democracy is a black hole that promises only chaos and violence. Third, while total autocracies claim the undying loyalty of "the people," they are often controlled by tribal or clan bosses who hail from ethno-religious minorities, such as Alawites in Syria or Sunni Muslims in Iraq. By repressing the majority—such as Syria's Sunni Muslims or Iraq's Shi'ites—they leave a trail of bitter foes whose supreme goal is revenge. Thus Syria's new leader, Bashir al-Assad, first promised democracy but then quickly retreated. A regime that massacred tens of thousands of Sunni Muslims in 1982 could hardly take the political risk typical of their liberalizing cousins in Egypt, Morocco, or Jordan. Full autocracies are trapped by an either-me-or-you logic that makes reform seem like suicide.

To be sure, liberalized autocracies also have extensive security establishments whose survival depends in part on the regime's control of economic resources. But in contrast to full autocracies, which were built on an edifice of total or near total control and exclusion, liberalized autocracies were constructed on a foundation of partial inclusion. Early in their history, their leaders had the good sense to partly dispense power to a wider universe of groups and institutions. As a result, they could afford to share power without risking a potentially suicidal win-lose confrontation with the opposition. In fact, the leaders of Egypt, Kuwait, Morocco, Jordan, Yemen, and Algeria have built alliances with forces that are officially part of the "opposition." This is simply unheard of in Iraq, Libya, Syria, or Tunisia.

Consider two arenas in which a measure of pluralism has made it easier for liberalized autocracies to initiate partial reforms without losing power. In economics, liberalized autocracies traditionally have pursued development strategies that necessitate the inclusion of competing economic forces. By reaching out to private businessmen, white collar bureaucrats, blue collar state workers, and professionals, they avoid becoming beholden to any one group. This usefully permits rulers to create different alliances and, on that basis, experiment with a variety of economic approaches. Since economic power is not totally fused with the political power, the ruling elite can loosen its grip without losing all the economic benefits that accrued from autocracy. (This is true even in oil-dependent states, such as Kuwait, which, despite the prominence of oil in the economy, boast different classes of merchants, professionals, and others.) Such advantages are unavailable to the leaders of full autocracies, such as Syria, who have hitched their political future to only a few key economic groups. This is why there has been nearly zero market reform in Syria while, in Morocco, Egypt, and Jordan, leaders could afford to partly let go of the state's control over the economy.

A more pluralistic political arena also makes it easier for autocrats to open up without fearing loss of ultimate power. Having given labor unions, professional syndicates, businessmen's associations, and civic organizations a measure of freedom from state interference, the leaders of liberalized autocracies are well placed to pursue a divide-and-rule strategy by which they play one group off against another. This game blurs the line between friend and foe, thus making it possible for rulers to constantly build different alliances with leaders inside and outside the regime. The leaders of Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, and to some extent Algeria are expert at this kind of juggling. But in Syria, Libya, Tunisia, and Iraq, there are fewer balls to juggle and thus little incentive to liberalize.
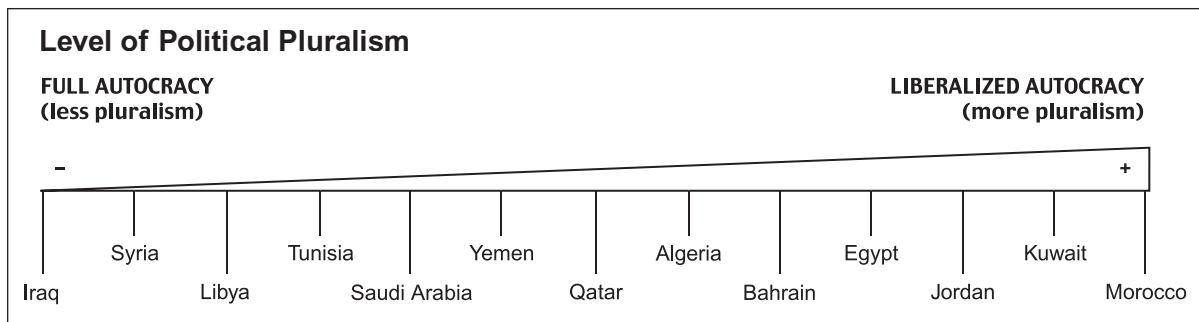
One factor that makes it easier or harder to sustain the juggling act so crucial to liberalized autocracies is regime type. To some extent, it makes a difference whether a state is ruled by a monarch or a president. By and large, kings have an advantage. Because they act as referees of the political field, rather than captains of any one team, they have more freedom of maneuver to divide, manipulate, and thus control society's competing groups. This strategy works especially well when a monarch can add a dash of Islamic legitimacy to the recipe. Thus, in Morocco and Jordan the authority of Muhammad VI and Abdullah II as ultimate arbiters has been enhanced by their purported lineage to the Prophet Mohammad, the founder of Islam. Presidents, by contrast, are tied to ruling parties, many of which oppose reform. As a result, they often have less room to maneuver or innovate. Paradoxically, "traditional" monarchies are sometimes better modernizers than "modern" presidents.

A quick comparison of Morocco and Algeria illustrates this paradox. In the early-1990s King Hassan was pressed to revise the Family Code. As *Amir il Mu'minim* or Commander of the Faithful, he welcomed this chance to promote reforms in ways that reinforced his own authority. He did this by skillfully playing off the various women's and religious associations that constitute Morocco's civil society. While the revised law pleased no one, passage of the new Family Code reminded Moroccans that in the final analysis the king decides the limits of reform. By contrast, Algeria's presidents have been wedded to a presidential system and ruling party that long ago tried to placate Islamic sentiments by upholding a traditional Family Code. As a result, not a single president has dared toy with the Family Code since Algeria tried in 1997 to reinvigorate its battered political system. This is not a matter of the personal character of any particular president. Rather, it a consequence of the very nature of the political system. In Algeria, the president lacks the legitimacy, stature, and

relatively pluralistic playing field that makes divide-and-rule an easier and more successful strategy in Morocco's relatively pluralistic monarchy.

Nevertheless, it is misleading to focus too intensely on the issue of regime type, since kings and presidents rule both full and liberalized autocracies. The most critical factor for anyone trying to gauge the future of autocracy in the Arab world is the degree of pluralism kings or presidents tolerate. Keeping this point in mind, we can draw a simple but useful continuum running from less to more pluralism, or from full autocracy to liberalized autocracy (see figure on the level of political pluralism). The more pluralism, the easier it is to sustain liberalization strategies and the divide-and-rule juggling acts so central to them.

Level of Political Pluralism

FULL AUTOCRACY
(less pluralism)

LIBERALIZED AUTOCRACY
(more pluralism)

−   Syria   Tunisia   Yemen   Algeria   Egypt   Kuwait   +

Iraq   Libya   Saudi Arabia   Qatar   Bahrain   Jordan   Morocco

CHARACTERISTICS OF LIBERALIZED AUTOCRACY

Partial Legitimacy and National Reconciliation

The goal of state-managed liberalization is to give opposition groups a way to blow off steam. The steam valve must meet opponents' minimal expectations for political openness and participation but prevent them from undermining the regime's ultimate control. In an ideal sense, it might be said that such limitations on political action undercut the legitimacy of liberalized autocracy. But for countries trying to exit a period of conflict, even an experiment in state-controlled opening can create space for political dialogues and accommodation in ways that give liberalized autocracies a measure of legitimacy—at least at the outset. For example, after Anwar Sadat's assassination in 1981, Egypt's new president, Hosni Mubarak, embarked on a political opening that brought many of Sadat's critics into the political arena. The leaders of Jordan, Kuwait, and Algeria have completed this model. In the wake of Jordan's 1989 bread riots, the late King Hussein oversaw the creation of a National Charter to define the new parameters of a more open political system. He then held the first competitive national elections in the modern history of the country. Similarly, after the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation in 1991 and, in an effort to overcome the deep chasm that had long marred regime-opposition relations, the Sabah family held discussions with a diverse range of opposition leaders. The 1992 elections were meant to signal a return to parliamentary life and thus a new era of cooperation in Kuwait politics. In Algeria, then-President Amin Zeroual initiated a national reconciliation program that sought to end a bloody civil war that had claimed some 100,000 lives. The 1997 parliamentary elections were followed by a new amnesty law that brought into the parliament some former members of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and other Islamists. Similarly, Yemen's 1993 parliamentary elections capped a two-year effort to create one unified state, after years of conflict between North and South Yemen.

These initiatives not only helped secure a measure of social and political peace at home, they also made it easier for regimes to gain U.S. economic and military support. From Washington's perspective, such political openings represent a major step forward. Thus, for both Arab and American leaders, liberalization-minus-substantive democracy came to be viewed as a winning formula.

Still, it would be inaccurate to see this formula as merely a "Potemkin Democracy" whose facade will collapse with the slightest push. State-managed political liberalization works because it entails real, if partial and limited, reforms in civil society, the economy, the electoral system, and parliament. These reforms bring additional benefit to the regimes in question, and to some extent, to their opposition as well. Indeed, it is precisely the fact that both sides get something out of the bargain that partly explains the endurance of liberalized autocracy.

Partial Reform of Civil Society Laws and Organizations

Liberalized autocracies not only permit but also promote the growth of nongovernmental or quasigovernmental organizations. Where centralized states can no longer provide adequate schooling or social and health services, regimes will encourage civic organizations to assume some of these tasks. (Of course, the state retains ultimate control of the purse strings.) Striking just the right balance requires "reforming" those laws that define how civic, professional, and labor associations govern and finance their activities. Yet as Egypt's infamous Laws of Association remind us, such reforms often place "civil society organizations" in a strange limbo, partly autonomous, partly captured. Still, for many social activists in the Arab world, this is not a bad trade off. Because they often lack independent sources of finance or get in trouble when they acquire foreign funds (as did Egypt's Saad Eddin Ibrahim, a sociology professor and civic activist who was recently acquitted of charges that his nongovernmental organization [NGO] unlawfully used foreign funds), they sometimes learn to tolerate such ambiguous laws. Regimes, in turn, not only retain final control; they further divide the opposition. For wily "reformists" such as Egypt's Mubarak, it is better to have 5,000 small civil society organizations than five big ones, since many competing NGOs impede social activists' cooperation. This is one reason why in the 1990s the rulers of Morocco and Egypt fostered the growth of thousands of semi-independent organizations. American democracy promoters encouraged this trend because they mistakenly assumed that civil society organizations had the capacity to push for democratic changes. What these democracy promoters failed to recognize is that such organizations could not compensate for the absence of well-organized political parties or truly representative parliaments.

Partial Reform of Economies

By bringing a variety of social and professional groups into the political arena, liberal autocracies also create space for partial economic reforms. During the 1980s and 1990s, decreasing oil revenues, rising foreign debts, and the paralysis of state-run industries all created a strong impetus to reinvigorate the private sector. Liberalized autocracies from Rabat to Amman looked to the business community to encourage foreign investment in ailing economies. This strategy often left many public sector industries intact since Arab leaders did not want to provoke an outcry from the many groups who would have paid a price for structural reforms, such as labor, state bureaucrats, and public sector managers. Yet if partial reforms have not removed the actual causes of economic crises, they have slowly expanded the private sectors in Morocco, Egypt, and Jordan by attracting some foreign and domestic investment.

Partial Reform of Parliaments and Electoral Systems

To attract a modicum of legitimacy and popular support, liberalized autocracies almost always allow elections and the creation of parliaments. More or less regular national elections have been held in Morocco since the 1960s, Egypt since 1976, Jordan since 1989, Kuwait since 1991, and Yemen since 1993 (for more detailed election results for these and other Arab countries, see appendix provided in this report). But elections and parliaments do not a democracy make. The essential elements for democracy are political parties that speak for organized constituencies, parliaments that have the constitutional authority to speak on behalf of the electorate, and constitutions that impose limits on executive authority. Because all three of these fundamental requirements are missing in the liberalized autocracies of the Arab world, no government in the region can credibly claim a democratic mandate.

The absence of strong political parties makes it difficult to build on the enthusiasm and hopes that a first round of competitive elections invariably generates. With the possible exception of some Islamist parties, the Arab world lacks strong political parties that can mobilize and—most important—sustain a mass following. Parties may exist in name, but in practice their leaders are usually drawn from the elite who have close family, personal, or economic ties to the rulers, but little support in society itself. Such state-focused ties are buttressed by pay-offs, favors, and bribes to ensure that most "opposition" politicians will only rarely defy the ruling authority. Moreover, when opposition groups do begin exhibiting excessive independence—as in Jordan and Kuwait during the early and mid-1990s—liberal autocracies have all kinds of mechanisms on hand to deal with such upstarts.

The most important of these mechanisms are constitutions and the autocratic laws they sanction. To the American reader, this sounds strange. We think of a constitution as the first guarantor of freedom and civil rights. But in the Arab world, constitutions are written to ensure that the president or king has ultimate power. Cabinets are formed and prime ministers chosen by an unelected executive. With the possible, and partial, exceptions of Morocco and Kuwait, these cabinets are not responsible before an elected majority in parliament. As a result, parliaments are more like debating societies than law-making institutions. While they sometimes assail this or that technical measure coming from the executive (as has occasionally been the case in Kuwait, for example), parliaments lack the constitutional authority to actually represent the will of the elected.

The laws passed by parliaments in liberalized autocracies almost always reflect the wishes of the president and his allies, or the king and his princes; therefore, many of these laws are explicitly designed to enhance state power and punish dissent. This is what legal experts mean when they observe that in the Arab world, there is rule *by* law rather than rule *of* law. In liberalized autocracies, unelected leaders are not so much above the law as they are its creator and ultimate dispenser. It is the job of parliaments to rubber-stamp these laws, and it is the mission of state-controlled judiciaries to enforce them. Even if appellate courts occasionally defy the will of the executive (as has happened in Egypt), at the end of the day they know their place. What is more, this entire legal machinery is sanctioned by constitutions replete with loopholes that provide for "complete freedom of speech and assembly"—so long as those freedoms do not harm "national" or "Islamic" values. Such conditioned liberties guarantee freedom of speech but not freedom *after* speech.

Rule *by* law creates not only weak parliaments and illiberal laws; it also gives executives the legal means to clamp down on parliaments that get too critical of government policies. One such tool is the manipulation of electoral laws. For example, before national elections in 1998, Jordan's electoral

law was revised in ways that dramatically reduced Islamist representation in the new parliament. Elsewhere, as in Egypt, the electoral laws make it hard for Islamists to run in political parties. Finally, as we have seen most recently in Jordan, when such tools become unreliable, leaders can invoke their constitutional authority to suspend parliament. In the Gulf, such suspensions have been a regular part of parliamentary life for decades, a point that no politician in the ruling establishment or opposition forgets.

Partial Inclusion (and Containment) of Islamists and Secularists

One of the main obstacles to democracy in the Arab world is the absence of consensus regarding national identity, particularly as it relates to the controversial question of Islam's place in public life. Many Islamists, including mainstream activists in parliaments and civil society, believe the state should enforce or even impose Islamic laws, while nominal or secular Muslims and non-Muslims want the state to protect their right to practice—or not practice—their religion. Ethnic groups—such as Sunni Muslim Kurds in Iraq and Syria, the Berbers in Morocco and Algeria, Christian minorities such as Egypt's Copts—and myriad civil society groups, such as women's rights organizations, labor unions, and professional syndicates, often fear Islamist domination. Lacking the capacity for mobilization that Islamists command via the mosque, such non-Islamist groups have sometimes tacitly backed autocracies rather than press for open elections. After all, many of these would-be democrats are not ready to give Islamists a "democratic mandate" to limit or even obliterate their civil and human rights. This happened in Algeria in 1992, when secularists in the labor unions and professional associations backed the coup that prevented the FIS from winning a majority of seats in the country's parliament. From the perspective of these secularists, full autocracy was preferable to the risks of a truly competitive political game.

Yet, if conflicts over national identity hinder democratization, they do not necessarily lead to total autocracy. Liberalizing autocracies can sometimes reduce or contain conflict between Islamists and non-Islamists through a process of partial and controlled inclusion that allows mainstream Islamists, Arab nationalists, and liberals to enter parliament as independents or as a formal political party. Islamists invariably make major gains when regimes allow them to compete in such semi-competitive elections. This occurred in Jordan in 1989, in Yemen in 1993, in Algeria in 1997, and in Bahrain and Morocco in 2002. But these victories have their limits. By funneling patronage to ruling parties and bureaucracies, to state-controlled organizations such as labor unions and professional associations, or to traditional tribes or ethnic groups such as Kurds or Berbers, liberal autocracies mobilize their own allies and thus make it hard for Islamists to attain electoral majorities. From the vantage point of regimes, state-controlled power sharing can make sense.

But why, one might ask, should Islamists accept such an arrangement? They do so because the alternatives—a rush into full democracy or a return to full autocracy—can be much worse for both the regime and its opposition. Algeria's sad experience illustrates this lesson. The 1992 coup that prevented the Islamists from winning a majority in the parliament hardly provided an enduring solution to Algeria's profound political and ideological conflict. On the contrary, as the subsequent seven-year civil war clearly shows, when the military tries to re-impose a full autocracy that completely shuts Islamists out of the political system, new horrors can emerge that eventually engulf the entire society. Given the drawbacks of *both* full democracy and full autocracy, the remaining solution is a state-enforced power-sharing formula that favors regimes but does not exclude any

group that accepts the ultimate authority of the regime itself. So long as both sides play by these quasi-autocratic rules of the game, some measure of coexistence between Islamists and non-Islamists seems possible.

Some of Algeria's neighbors apparently have learned this lesson. For example, Morocco's Islamist Justice and Development Party won some 12 percent of seats in the Lower House during the September 2002 parliamentary elections. Although it probably could have taken at least 50 percent, its leaders chose not to run a full slate of candidates and thus avoided a head-on collision with the ruling establishment. As a result, the country's liberalized autocracy has weathered the storm that might have emerged from a fully democratic election.

Still, the logic of state-enforced power sharing does not always prevail. Indeed, it can prove elusive when especially sharp ideological or sectarian divisions pit ruler against the opposition. In Egypt, for example, the regime has barred members of the Muslim Brotherhood from creating a political party and has obstructed their efforts to run as independents. The Brotherhood's quest for an Islamic state is viewed simply as too threatening to be accommodated by any power-sharing formula. In Bahrain, meanwhile, the split between the minority Sunnis and the majority Shi'ites has hindered recent attempts to promote power sharing. In October 2002 the royal family (which is Sunni) held elections under rules designed to benefit Sunni candidates. Many Shi'ites boycotted the polls, thus setting the stage for a new parliament whose legitimacy is called into question by a significant part of the population. Finally, in Lebanon, a formal power-sharing arrangement has survived only because Syrian troops protect it. Power sharing is hard to sustain absent a strong state or an outside power to enforce it.[1]

Yet if its record is mixed, state-managed partial inclusion has faired pretty well in Jordan, Kuwait, and to a lesser extent in Algeria. It has done so because it offers both Islamists and secularists some advantages. The crucial benefit, especially for Islamists, is the chance to sink roots in society. Even if parliaments have no real power, Islamists can use the cover gained from participating in them to spread the "good word." This has been the case in Jordan, Kuwait, Yemen, and more recently Morocco. Parliaments can also offer secularists and Islamists their first chance to pursue dialogue after years of conflict. For example, while radical Islamists continue to use violence in Algeria, a measure of peaceful coexistence prevailed between mainstream Islamist, secular, and Berber parties during the first three years of Algeria's 1997 parliament. In Kuwait and Jordan, Islamists have joined forces with Arab nationalists and leftists to challenge privatization laws. In Jordan all three groups have assailed the country's peace treaty with Israel. Moreover, in all three countries, Islamists and secularists have on occasion served in the same government. Still, whether such limited power sharing promotes enduring ideological moderation and national reconciliation is another question. Instead, it might merely provide a convenient way for Islamists and secularists to avoid further conflict, a kind of ideological cease-fire that does little to enhance the legitimacy of parliament or national reconciliation. Partial inclusion has long-term political costs, as does the very institution of liberalized autocracy in the Arab world.

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[1]   I have not included Lebanon among my cases of liberalized autocracy because the country's political system is not a liberalized autocracy. Lebanon is a "consociational democracy" whose parliamentary system is designed to provide all groups—Christian, Shi'ite, Sunni, and Druze—some representation in an elected government. Syria's military and political presence in Lebanon helps to sustain this formal power-sharing system while imposing limits on it. It is impossible to gage Lebanon's potential for democracy so long as Damascus maintains the ultimate say over the country's political system.

COSTS OF LIBERALIZED AUTOCRACY

Regimes that embark on partial societal, economic, or political reforms know that the short-term gains that come with liberalizing the political and social system often exact a long-term price. But since most Arab leaders, as do most politicians, deal with short time horizons, they are less concerned about the cumulative consequences of day-to-day political survival. We can briefly assess the costs that accrue from the partial reform of civil society, the economy, the electoral field, and regime-controlled power sharing.

Ideologically Fragmented Civil Society and Weak Political Society

One of the most significant costs of partial civil society reform is the aggravation of ideological conflicts. In the Arab world, many human rights organizations, women's associations, and even "nonpolitical" environmental groups are torn by disputes pitting Marxists, liberal secularists, Arab nationalists, Islamists, tribes, or ethnic groups against one another. Anyone who has tried to get NGOs to cooperate in Egypt or Morocco has seen how ethno-religious or ideological conflicts play into the hands of rulers.

However, elite manipulation is not the sole source of such divisiveness. Rather, ideological conflict is a by-product of a system that inhibits the growth of political society (that is, an independent realm of political parties that can mobilize constituencies that have a stake in what their leaders say and do). This is a second cost of liberalized autocracies. Because they lack effective parties, they create an incentive for civil society organizations to take up political roles for which they are badly suited. In Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan, professional syndicates often spend more time championing rival ideologies than using their expertise to solve concrete problems. The polemical nature of the Arab press can also be partly attributed to the role that opposition newspapers play as surrogate political parties. Rather than focus on reporting or analysis, they use rumor, innuendo, and pandering to the "man on the street" to get the regime's attention. Since September 11, 2001, the American press has featured stories about how such yellow journalism includes doses of anti-Americanism and even anti-Semitism. But the American press has failed to emphasize the costs of such polemics for Arabs. In its wake, civil society fails to sprout its own wings while political society remains stunted and ineffective.

Partial Economic Reforms: Giving Capitalism a Bad Name

Partial economic reforms exact long-term costs. Because they often open the economy to private sector investment while leaving public sector industries largely intact, they create a dualistic economy whose inefficient public sector industries and bureaucracies continue to cost governments millions of dollars. Moreover, because partial economic reforms leave bureaucrats in charge, the resulting red tape and corruption discourages more productive forms of private investment and trade. Anyone who has walked the streets of Cairo, Rabat, or Amman knows that many of the real moneymakers are the new businessmen who rake in quick profits from real estate, the import (or smuggling) of luxury and consumer goods, and currency speculation. Finally, partial economic reforms, absent democratization, do not ensure transparency. In Morocco, Egypt, Algeria, and to a lesser extent Jordan, the cronies of the ruling establishment have not just given capitalism a bad name: Their visible profit making also feeds anti-Western resentment and thus stokes the flames of Islamic fundamentalism against "Western-style democracy."

Partial Political Reform: A Big Trap?

The biggest price of liberalized autocracy is political. The longer liberalized autocracies depend on weak political parties and impotent legislatures, the more difficult it becomes to move from state-managed liberalization to genuine democratization. Since where you can go depends on where you have been, the very success of liberalized autocracy can become a trap for even the most well-intentioned leader. Thus, while the new and decidedly Westernized kings of Morocco and Jordan came to the throne promising all kinds of democratic initiatives, they both eventually fell back on the instruments of liberalized autocracy. Having done so, they must now learn to live with the negative consequences of partial political reform. Among these are: reinforcing Islamist power, increased ideological confusion and weak legitimacy, growing civil conflict, and what I call transitions to nowhere.

Reinforcing Islamist Power. Through their mosques, charitable institutions, and health clinics, Islamists advance their cause, to the detriment of their secular and ethnic competitors. This is inevitable, since Islamists, unlike their non-Islamist rivals, benefit from weakly institutionalized party systems. When such unequal competition produces Islamist successes at the polls, governments react by changing the electoral rules of the game, as they have in Egypt and Jordan, or by embarking on a strategy of de-liberalization. This can take the form of more repression of opposition newspapers, civil society activists, or politicians. Or it can be achieved by narrowing the scope of parliamentary life, a trend that became visible in Egypt and Jordan during the 1990s. Indeed, in Jordan, elections have been postponed twice over the last year and a half because the regime fears that Islamists would make major gains in a free election.

Increased Ideological Confusion and Weak Legitimacy. Because liberalizing autocrats sustain their rule by manipulating different groups and the competing notions of authority they espouse, even the most well meaning of reformists may not be well placed to advance a democratic vision of rule. When Jordan's new king, Abdullah II, appears as a Westernized businessman on Monday, a liberal thinker on Wednesday, an army officer on Thursday, and a pious sheikh on Friday, the resulting ideological mishmash points in no single direction. Such confusion obscures the fact that at the end of the day, all liberalizing autocrats fall back on the state's dissemination of a patrimonial vision of politics. This vision demands that all groups—secular, liberal, Islamist, leftist, or ethnic—accept the king or the president's ultimate authority. Wedded to this ideological default mechanism, the rulers of liberalized autocracies have not, at least until recently, challenged their public education systems to promote democratic ideals. Indeed, the leaders of Egypt, Yemen, and Kuwait have occasionally sought to appease, coopt, echo, or more rarely align themselves with illiberal Islamic groups. Such Islamicizing tactics can sometimes strengthen Islamists, thus hastening the day when the regime must narrow the political field and thus de-liberalize.

Nurturing Civil Conflict. State-enforced power sharing and partial inclusion can give elected officials an opportunity for dialogue. But because parliaments rarely represent the electorate and therefore do not wield real power, parliamentarians often find plenty of incentives to indulge in ideological one-upmanship rather than to pursue concrete programs that might help bridge the divide between secularists and Islamists. This has been Kuwait's unfortunate experience. Despite occasional cooperation between mainstream Islamists and secularists, the gulf between them has only grown. There, as elsewhere in the Arab world, partial inclusion acts more like an extended cease-fire than a path toward reconciliation and political maturity. Some might argue that the

only way to resolve this dilemma is to have a real democracy, one that would force the population to choose between competing identities, or compel rival leaders to offer a new vision of national unity. But since such a bold move would probably magnify rather than diminish religious or ethnic conflict (at least initially), liberalizing autocrats prefer holding onto the life raft of state-managed partial inclusion rather than abandoning it for the stormy waters of full democratization. Moreover, if power sharing fails to bring a measure of stability, rulers can de-liberalize by using the many tools of repression at their disposal. This choice, of course, only widens the gap between regime and opposition, thus further weakening the legitimacy of liberalized autocracy.

    Transitions to Nowhere. Because most autocrats (and even some opposition groups) are loath to give up the benefits of partial reform, they have sometimes flirted with, but thus far never crossed, the line into full autocracy. Instead, they go through unstable cycles of opening and closing, liberalization and de-liberalization. The bumpy duration of these cycles depends in part on how much threat their leaders perceive. But what does not happen is a decisive move forward that would allow regimes and oppositions to define a new political system based on a common set of values and aspirations. This is the biggest problem liberalized autocracy creates: It snares regimes in an "endless transition" (*marhalla intiqaliyya mustamirra*) that eventually robs each new generation of what little hope it had when a new king or president invariably inaugurated a "new" era of reconciliation, openness, and reform.

WHICH ARAB STATES CAN (OR SHOULD) EXIT THE TRAP OF LIBERALIZED AUTOCRACY?

While liberalized autocracy can be a trap, the severity of this trap varies from country to country. And, since some Arab states are more trapped than others, the cost they pay for trying to get un-trapped also varies. This is an important point for democracy promoters. Those in the Bush administration who favor a go-slow approach fear that any attempt to quickly remove the snare of liberalized autocracy will breed instability. Others apparently believe that in the wake of a successful war in Iraq and the creation of a reasonably pluralistic government in Baghdad, a go-fast approach will be possible. In point of fact, a one-size-fits-all strategy, be it incrementalist or rapid, will never be appropriate for all liberalized autocracies. Since they are not all equally ensnared, the challenge is to devise a rough guide that will help us distinguish where and when a go-slow approach is preferable, and where and when more radical surgery may be in order. Among the factors such a guide should include are: the longevity of liberalized autocracies; the size of the population and the level of economic crisis; the level of political and institutional pluralism in civil society and party system; and the type of regime.

- ***Factor 1: Longevity.*** The longer Arab states bare the cost of liberalized autocracy, the harder it becomes to create functioning civil and political societies that encourage rival forces to find democratic ways to resolve their conflicts. Paradoxically, because success makes a move from liberalization to democracy risky, some of the most experienced liberalizers are likely to devise new kinds of "reform" to skirt democracy. Thus, for example, the goal of the current effort to reform Egypt's National Democratic Party (NDP) is not to democratize; rather, the goal of this reform is to infuse new blood into a ruling party whose political body has ossified. By contrast, regimes that have just embarked on political liberalization, such as in Bahrain

and Qatar, have a window of opportunity to plant the institutional and constitutional seeds of political society and genuine parliamentary representation. In short, regimes that are less practiced in the art of survival are better placed than those with ample experience to devise a political liberalization strategy whose purpose is to open the door to democracy rather than close it.

- *Factor 2: Size of Population and Level of Economic Crisis.* Countries such as Egypt, Morocco, and Algeria—which boast huge populations and economies hamstrung by extensive public sector industries, corruption, and external debts—are not good candidates for a quick move from liberalized autocracy to competitive democracy. Having pursued a dualistic development strategy that has sown ever greater levels of social discontent, the leaders of big countries assume that any effort to deepen democracy by holding free elections will only create big problems by mobilizing the opponents of market reform. By contrast, smaller and richer countries are better placed to advance both market and political reforms. Of course, the source of wealth is also important. The oil-based economies of the Arab Gulf states link economic and political power in ways that inhibit political reform. Still, since countries such as Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar have great wealth and a small native population, their leaders have far more room to advance political reforms than their counterparts in states such as Egypt or Morocco.

- *Factor 3: Level of Organized Pluralism.* By pluralism, I am not referring to the often vaunted role of civil society organizations or NGOs. Although they frequently foster liberalization, civil society organizations cannot substitute for the vital role that political parties must play in promoting democratization. While all liberalized autocracies have weak party systems, those that have promoted a more competitive electoral arena are better off than those that have limited competition. This point is especially important given the challenge posed by mainstream Islamist parties. As Morocco illustrates, where Islamist parties must compete with secular parties that command some measure of support, they pose less of a threat to the regime. Less threat makes more reform possible. By contrast, where they have been excluded from politics (as in Egypt), or where Islamists do not face significant competition from other secular, ethnic, or even Islamic opposition parties, the sudden entrance of Islamists into an open political arena will threaten the regime. Increased threat hinders a move from liberalized autocracy to real democratization.

- *Factor 4: Regime Type.* As noted, most monarchs are better positioned than most presidents to promote the kinds of regime opposition understandings that will facilitate reforms. The latter are usually wedded to ruling parties or ruling establishments that are loath to let go of "their" president and the authority he provides. By contrast (and with the exception of the monarchy in Saudi Arabia, which is closely tied to and thus constrained by the Wahhabi clerical establishment), most Arab kings are well placed to stand above the fray and thus encourage accommodation of opposition to the regime. Thus, the presidents of Egypt and Algeria are less likely to promote a move forward from liberalization to democracy, while the kings of Bahrain, Morocco, Kuwait, and Jordan have relatively more freedom to do so.

These four criteria suggest that recent liberalizers, such as Bahrain and Qatar, as well as more well-entrenched liberalized autocracies that benefit from the arbitrating role of monarchs, such as Kuwait and Morocco, are potential candidates for moving beyond liberalization toward democracy.

Morocco's legacy of party competition, however imperfect, should also help lower the costs entailed in genuine democratization. Still, forward movement does not require a sudden leap into the unknown. Rather, it requires carefully targeted constitutional and legal reforms that give parliament and political parties real authority to represent their constituency. Broader educational reforms that promote democratic and pluralistic values are also necessary. These reforms would give electoral systems and the parliament they create the kind of legitimacy they sorely need.

Such bold changes will also require bold leadership from reformers who are ready to seize opportunities when they arise. Recent liberalizers, such as those in Bahrain and Qatar, have a chance to avoid ensnaring themselves in the kinds of traps older that more experienced liberalizers have fostered. But beware! In the Middle East, windows of opportunity tend to close quickly. Unfortunately, the signals from both countries (such as the banning of political parties) suggest that their leaders have chosen the liberalized autocracy path. Once they go down it, even the most visionary reformer will have difficulty switching to competitive democracy.

By contrast, the leaders of Algeria, Egypt, and to some extent Jordan are candidates for a more incrementalist approach. As they face daunting economic challenges, as their Islamists would make gains in open elections without facing significant competition from non-Islamist parties, and as their leaders face growing discontent over regional conflicts in Israel–Palestine and Iraq, any effort to push for rapid political change would only set the stage for regime opposition conflicts and thus more deliberalization. That said, a go-slow approach should not be limited to the same-old reforms the United States has promoted before. Secretary Powell in effect listed those very reforms in his "Middle East Partnership" speech. They include the usual suspects: civil society building, promoting women's political participation, and of course, accelerating economic development. These are all good things. But even a go-slow approach must tackle more fundamental political challenges, such as party development, educational reforms, promoting the rule of law, and pressing for constitutionally mandated organizations to protect human rights.

CONCLUSION

Whatever the approach, Washington will not be able to simply impose its preferences on the region. For the foreseeable future, the United States will have to work with Arab leaders whose principle concern will be to shore up their legitimacy in the wake of a highly unpopular war. Indeed, because the war in Iraq has reinforced the influence of radical Arab nationalists and Islamists, Arab leaders will resist Washington's calls for political reform. In the short run, even the administration's current go-slow approach may encounter resistance. That said, in the medium and the longer term, the public outcry against the Iraq war will probably wane, and with that, the question of domestic political reform will emerge as a central issue throughout the Arab world. The creation of a reasonably stable, open, and most of all popular government in Baghdad—if we are lucky and skillful enough to achieve it—may in turn reinforce the pressures for change in liberalized autocracies, and even in some full autocracies, such as in Tunisia or Saudi Arabia. When this moment comes, Washington will have to face some difficult decisions about how to encourage both regimes and oppositions to think beyond the day-to-day politics of political survival. This will require paying close attention to the costs and benefits of liberalized autocracy.

ELECTION RESULTS FOR SELECTED ARAB COUNTRIES
(number of seats won)

Egypt

Party	1984	1987	1990	1995	2000
NDP	390 (87%)	348 (78%)	360 (81%)	417 (94%)	388
Muslim Brotherhood	8	30	Boycott	1	17
New Wafd	50	35	Boycott	6	7
Socialist Labor Party		27	Boycott		
Liberal Party		3	Boycott	1	1
Progressive Unionist Party			5	5	6
Arab Democratic Nasserist Party					2
Nasserists					5
Independents			79 (18%)	13 (3%)	16
Total	**448**	**448**	**444**	**444**	**444**

Jordan

Party	1989	1993	1997
OPPOSITION			
Islamic Action Front	22	16	Boycott
Independent Islamists	12	6	6
Leftists Pan-Arab Nationalists	13	7	6
REGIME LOYALISTS			
Traditional, Conservatives, and Jordanian Nationalists	33	51	68
Total	**80**	**80**	**80**

Morocco

Party	1993	1997	2002
Socialist Union of Popular Forces, social-democratic	56	57	50
Independence Party, social-democratic	52	32	48
Justice and Development Party, Islamist			42
National Rally of Independents, conservative	42	46	41
Popular Movement, conservative	33	40	27
National Popular Movement, conservative	25	19	18
Constitutional Union, centrist	54	50	16
National Democratic Party, conservative	24	10	12
Front of Democratic Forces		9	12
Party of Progres and Socialism, communist	11	19	11
Democratic Union			10
Democratic and Social Movement, centrist		32	7
Socialist Democratic Party, socialist		5	6
Parti Al Ahd			5
Alliance of Liberties			4
Reform and Development Party			3
Party of the Unified Socialist Left, socialist			3
Moroccan Liberal Party			3
Citizens' Forces			2
Environment and Development Party			2
Democratic Party of Independence			2
National Congress Party Ittihadi			1
Labor Organization	2	4	
Labor Party	2		
Shura and Independence	9	1	
Popular Constitutional Movement		9	
Total	**333**	**335**	**325**

Yemen

Party	1993	1997
General People's Congress	123	187
Yemeni Reform Grouping	62	53
Yemeni Socialist Party	56	0
Yemeni Ba'th	7	2
Al Haqq	2	0
Nasserite-Unity	1	2
Nasserite-Democratic	1	0
Nasserite-Correctionist	1	0
Independents	48	54
Total	**301**	**298**

Algeria

Party	1991 (1st round)[a]	1997	2002
Front for National Liberation	16	62	199
Islamic Salvation Front (FIS)	188 (44%)	Banned	Banned
El-Islah/Movement for National Reform			43
Democratic National Rally		156	47
Movement of the Society for Peace		69	38
Workers' Party		4	21
Algerian National Front			8
Harakat al-Nahda al-Islamiyya (Islamic Renaissance Movement)		34	1
Party of Algerian Renewal			1
Movement of National Understanding			1
Social-Democratic Front of Socialist Forces	23	20	
Berber Rally for Culture and Democracy		19	
Non-partisans			30
Total	**430**	**380**	**389**

a   Total does not reflect number of seats because second round of elections did not take place.

Kuwait[a]

Bloc/Party	1992	1996	1999
Islamists	10	17	14
Islamic Constitutional Movement			
Populist Islamic Group			
National Islamic coalition			
Liberals	13	4	20
Democratic Forum			
Constitutional Group			
Parliamentarians Group			
Coalition of 1985			
Pro-government	11	30	16
Independents			
Bedouins			
Total	**50**	**50**	**50**

a   In addition to elected members of parliament, the Royal Family appoints up to 16 additional members to the parliament. Because most of the cabinet members are also members of the Royal Family, this practice ensures the Royal Family ample influence over the parliament.

Bahrain

Party	2002
Independents (including Liberals and Democrats)	21
Islamists	19
Total	**40**

Note: These tables are assembled from the best resources available but may contain anomalies because data for every party were not available.

Source: All tables in the appendix compiled by author.

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