



DANISH INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
STRANDGADE 56 • 1401 COPENHAGEN K • DENMARK
TEL +45 32 69 87 87 • diis@diis.dk • www.diis.dk

**THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD
TO ARAB DEMOCRACY**

Erik Boel

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Danish Institute for International Studies, DIIS

Strandgade 56, DK-1401 Copenhagen, Denmark

Ph: +45 32 69 87 87

Fax: +45 32 69 87 00

E-mails: diis@diis.dk

Web: www.diis.dk

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Erik Boel, Senior Advisor, DIIS

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ABSTRACT

From Marrakesh to Cairo and from Ramallah to Riyadh, the Arabs debate and reflect on their own society as never done before. However, the road to democratisation in that region is long and winding. This paper analyses the experience the Americans have acquired regarding that goal which the US has placed on top of the international agenda. Experience, which can also be useful in a Danish context.

RESUME

Fra Marrakesh til Cairo og fra Ramallah til Riyadh debatterer og reflekterer araberne i øjeblikket over deres egne samfunds fremtid som aldrig før. Imidlertid er vejen til en demokratisering af denne region lang og snoet. Dette paper analyserer de amerikanske erfaringer for at nå dette mål, som USA har placeret øverst på den internationale dagsorden. Erfaringer som også kan være nyttige i en dansk sammenhæng.

The Long and Winding Road to Arab Democracy

“It is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world”, stated President George W. Bush in his inaugural speech in January 2005. Previously, stability was the cornerstone of the American proclaimed Middle Eastern policy; today the cornerstone is democracy and freedom.

The recent terror attacks in London and Egypt have made the question regarding democracy in the Middle East relevant once again. Regardless of rhetoric, large donations and Arabian self-examination following 9/11, status remains that Israel is the only Middle Eastern nation in which the citizens can remove those in power through free, democratic elections. All of the 22 member states of the Arab league are more or less authoritarian regimes.

The prospect of short term recovery of the undemocratic situation is not encouraging: Certainly, the Arab governments say all of the things, we want to hear, but they lack real will to establish, in practice, democratic conditions with everything this implies of independent courts of justice, a recognition of fundamental constitutional and civil rights, a flourishing civilian society and so on. Perhaps, the governments do take necessary steps towards political liberalisation, but they do not introduce reforms that might result in them losing control of power.

The Saudi Arabian government has pointed out that if it gets too strongly involved in a reform policy, it risks alienating the religious leaders whom the government is highly dependent on in the war on terror. The Arab states are aware of how sensitive particularly the US is regarding the fight against terror, and they use this sensitivity to justify violations of human rights. It is, however, important that our well-justified agenda to fight terror does not overshadow or happen at the expense of our wish to promote democracy.

On the other hand, the western countries' governments highly prioritise supply (read: oil) interests and geo-strategic concerns when it all comes down to it. Hence, we experience difficulties in defining a consistent agenda. And because of first and foremost the war in Iraq and the Palestinian conflict, the Western states, and particularly the credibility of the US, can be strictly limited.

Also in the public opinion – in the so-called “Arab street” – we find irresolution: Many people ask where the US’ sudden interest for democracy in their part of the world stems from. It is a problem in itself that democracy in the Middle East is perceived as an American idea.

What is the status of the reform-oriented opposition in the Arab countries that should be our ally in the efforts to establish democracy? Here, we can conclude that, apart from a few exceptions, the democratic credibility of the opposition is more or less of questionable character.

Earlier this year, many spoke of the “Arabian spring”. The reasons for this were the elections in Iraq in January, the Palestinian presidential election, the developments in Libya and tendencies in Egypt which were interpreted as steps on the road to more democratic conditions. However, that interpretation has gone up in smoke and now hardly anyone talks about how the war in Iraq should have resulted in a democratic domino effect. The violence in Iraq is still widespread, and the people in that country continues to divide themselves into ethnical dividing lines to a larger extend than previously. In the Palestinian areas, Barghouti did sadly enough not participate in the elections. He is known as a “hardliner”, but it is often the “hardliners” who are able to deliver the political results which the current leader Abbas has had difficulties in providing. Evidently, Syria has retreated its military from Lebanon, but Syria still pulls the political strings in Lebanon, and there are no visible signs of a softened political situation. In Egypt, the treatment of the oppositional politician Ayman Nour does not indicate that President Mubarak’s possesses a real will to introduce more democratic conditions.

However, it is after all a fact that from Marrakesh to Cairo and from Ramallah to Riyadh, the Arabs debate and reflect on their own society as never done before. Democracy is on the regional agenda in the Arab league among other places. Subjects that used to be taboos – such as introducing a maximum election period for political leaders – are now being discussed freely, and the question is no longer whether or not reforms are demanded, but rather which reforms are necessary. The UN has stated that the Middle East is the least democratic region in the world and at the same time the region longing for democracy the most.

The Arabs and the Middle Eastern countries are under pressure at the same time. The individual’s identity is being challenged as a result of globalisation and informative technology. The economic globalisation creates stronger dependency and greater inequality, and it diminishes the states’ roles simultaneously. Furthermore, the countries are facing a huge challenge regarding demography; populations will have doubled by the year of 2050, and 36

per cent of the Arabs are at present below the age of 15 years (in the EU, 16 per cent are below the age of 15). Apart from 9/11 and American demands for reforms, socio-economic and political changes throughout the 1980's and the 1990's have thus increased the need for reforms.

The background of the interest for reforms is additionally that old ideologies such as Pan-Arabism and Arabian socialism continues to be practised by many intellectuals, but has lost their attraction in the broad public, and the ideologies do therefore not hold the same status as previously. At the same time, the statistics make an impression: The Arab world is lagging behind nearly all other regions in the world in political, economical, intellectual and research areas.

After having returned from a research seminar in Washington this summer, it is clear to me that the US – since the launch of the democracy project after 9/11 – has lost some illusions. But the Americans have acquired important experience regarding this goal which the USA has rightly placed on top of the international agenda. Experience, which also can be useful in regards to the efforts we are making in Denmark where we have invested DKR 100 millions (\$ 16.6 million) annually in order to stimulate democracy under the headline "the Arab initiative".

Today, it is part of the picture that the US is a Middle Eastern military power, but to a large extend, the US is also a political and economic power in that region. The role of the US is equally controversial as central. It is therefore a useful idea to take a closer look at some of the experiences registered in the research environment in Washington.

First and foremost, it is evident today that the introduction of democratic conditions in the Middle East will take time, indeed a long time. And we must be prepared for setbacks during this process. We must also realise that there are limits to what we in the West – even the US – can achieve. The efforts to introduce democracy in the Middle East will be a long, tough haul. It might result in setbacks when especially American politicians give the impression of democracy being established just like that and hereby creating unrealistic expectations. If there is a tremendous pressure to achieve fast and visible results, there is a risk that the relevant players, in Denmark the development agency Danida, will reach out for the lowest hanging fruits and for example concentrate on organising conferences and educational programmes instead of entering the most sensitive questions regarding a fair distribution of political power.

It is naive to believe that introducing democracies in the Arab countries will be the end of terrorism. However, a task force led by amongst others the former US Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright establishes in a report from June this year that “a more open political environment will likely weaken the pull of extremist ideologies that fuel violence.”

We need to realise that none of the Middle Eastern countries are identical when it comes to the conditions for establishing democracy. What might seem reasonable in one country does not necessarily seem reasonable in another country. Hence, it is important to develop individual strategies for the countries in question.

On one side, the dialogue with the Arab states is, as indicated, not always uncomplicated. On the other side, there is no other option. Even when it comes to cooperation with private groups such as women’s groups, we are dependent on the direct or indirect acceptance of the governments concerned. We must be careful not to force projects on them which they only accept, because they feel pressured to accept the projects. We have to be clear and concrete when it comes to goals of openness, “rule of law”, public contribution, equality etc., but we must hand over the means to accomplish these goals to the Arab governments to a larger extent. They know their own fields better and if the Western countries are in charge of the projects, we easily risk playing the part as scapegoat if the projects fail.

The problematic also contains an important cultural dimension. It is not only the Arab governments which fear democracy, because they find it will cause chaos (this means threatening their own power positions), it is also a widespread public feeling, cf. an Arab saying which goes that 1000 years of tyranny is better than one year of chaos. Edward Walker, head of the Middle East Institute in Washington, expresses that many Arabs feel that an unnecessary rush towards democracy will boost radical forces and create unstableness. This fear for changes is also known in our own part of the world. But in the Middle East, the background is Islamization, a fear of dissolution of social bonds and an insecurity of what is to follow. The concern can most likely be reduced by the West contributing to the economic and social development which can provide hope of a better future.

The Western countries need to, if not settle, then at least relate more explicitly to our own double standards. In the US, researchers have pointed out that if a nation as Saudi Arabia had carried through an election as Iran’s recent presidential election, the US would have claimed it to be a huge triumph for democracy’s march of progress in the Middle East. Even though many candidates were restrained from running for election, the selection of candidates was reasonably representative for the political mainstreams in today’s Iran. But because the US has

a security political agenda in regards to Iran, the US makes particular strong demands to Iran. Today, it is really only in regards to Iran and Syria that the US seriously takes a tough line concerning the promotion of democracy.

Many Arabs criticise the US for abolishing sanctions against Libya which is a notorious repressive regime. Certainly, the US intervenes in favour of Nour in Egypt, but when three Saudi Arabian reform politicians receive prison sentences from six to nine years for demanding implementation of a constitutional monarchy, the US does not react. Nor does the US react when Jordan or Bahrain punishes dissidents. When the government in Yemen massacres Shiites in the Northern part of the country, the West does not make a sound. The lack of consistency in the Western countries' policies promotes Arabian cynicism regarding the real Western motives to promote democracy.

It is important to realise that naturally there is a risk of increasing unstableness on a short-term basis when we try to establish more democratic conditions in the Arab states. However, the danger by letting things slide is substantially far greater.

We have to be careful not to oversell the benefits of a democratisation of the Middle East. We also have to accept that the Middle Eastern democratic governments will not necessarily be positive towards the Western countries or our goals. Bear in mind that it was a totalitarian country, Jordan, which helped settle a peace agreement with Israel back then. Some of the leading oppositional politicians of today's Syria attack their own government for wanting to resume peace negotiations with Israel. It is possible, even likely, that democratisation will give Islamic power a revival. This illustrates how Western security and democratic interests not always correspond to Middle Eastern interests. At least not on a short-term basis – and it is the short-term basis which is crucial in the political decision-making process.

It can be concluded that there is a distinct lack of real independent voluntary organisations – NGO's – in the Middle East. My own experience is that the typical Arab grass-root is a former ambassador who continues to have strong connections in the governmental machinery, and that his NGO is sponsored by the president's wife! Many even speak of "gongo's": "governmental-organised nongovernmental organisation". And those grass-roots, who in fact are independent, do not wish to collaborate with the Western countries' governments, because this might compromise their integrity. Ultimately, it can furthermore be debated how much public mobilisation the US really wants, because Washington fears the "Arab street".

With regard to the democratic agenda, it is a problem in itself that the many NGO's are extremely divided and do not have a joint, overall social and political vision. An important division is between the Islamists and the pro-democratic movements who, on their side, believe that a liberal society is the only protection against Islamization.

Researcher Amy Hawthorne has drawn attention to the fact that the Western "democracy managers" often have a perception of the Arab NGO's as being both too wide and too narrow: On one hand, they have exaggerated expectations for such organisations being able to form a counterpart to their respective governments. On the other hand, they limit themselves by only cooperating with the type of NGO's they know from home and feel safe with. These are NGO's whose leaders speak English and who feel at home in international circles. These democracy-activists are very capable of organising conferences, but they do not make a great impact on the "Arab street" which belongs to the Islamists. It is also symptomatic that when the Arab governments feel threatened, they find that the threat emerges from the wide, publicly anchored Islamic organisations and not from the elitist, democratic movements supported by the USA and the EU.

The relationship to Islamic organisations in the Middle East is particularly controversial in the US. The case is rather simple regarding terror organisations such as Al Qaeda or organisations which pursue their agenda by peaceful means such as (today) the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt among other countries. The difficulties first seem to appear when it comes to hybrid-organisations as for example Hizbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Palestinian areas. It is official US-policy to categorise these organisations as terror organisations.

But the Albright-report indicates that these movements partly play an essential social part and partly participates in the legal political processes in their respective societies. Provided that they put down their arms and demonstrate a real willingness to obey all of the democratic rules, the US should not protest against these groupings taking part in the political processes, according to Albright.

Many people in the American research environment point out that the Islamic organisations are vital forces in the region. Marina Ottaway from the Carnegie Endowment believe that they simply are the key to constructing democracies in the Arab countries, and she refers to moderate Islamic parties already taking part in the political processes in Morocco, Algeria and Jordan amongst other countries. As a minimum, we should get to know them. And even though we might not find further grounds for closer relations with the leaders of the movements, we should not ignore their political backing. We hardly promote more moderate

lines in these groups by turning our backs to them. It is also quite conceivable that if the Arab countries' governments and the Western countries begin cooperating with the more moderate part of these movements, it will result in fragmentations and break-ups, and the more radical elements will hereby be separated from the moderate elements. Seen from a democratic perspective, much can be won by this, because the more fanatic fragments become more manageable.

Furthermore, Albright concludes that in order to prevent the Islamic movements from so to speak pulling off coups of the political systems, the Arab constitutions should in the future include protection of minority rights for example by establishing an upper house which is to protect such rights or by directing supreme courts to secure the public against dictatorships.

In the coming years, the US faces an important assignment in defining a thought-through policy concerning Islamic organisations that are hostile towards the West and at least ambivalent regarding their relationship to democracy. Something similar concerns our relationship with the critical Arab satellite media such as al-Jazeera. Such a self-reflection is even more required in a European – and a Danish! – context where the perception of Islamic organisations is particularly crude. We must relate far more actively to political Islam, because the Muslim groups in our own societies are not always equally well integrated.

The introduction of multi-party elections should not be our only criteria for success. Roughly speaking: rather rights than phoney elections. A promotion of people's rights will directly support democratic values and independent courts of justice, a free and independent civilian society, respect for the fundamental human rights etc. This is the only way that we can ensure that the new democracies will be viable cf. that the legal authorities in South Africa spend a long time on properly preparing the first democratic elections after the abolishment of Apartheid. If free elections are carried through headlong as some show performance because of pressure from the West, that wishes to demonstrate quick results, it will only result in disappointments and setbacks.

Economic support and professional guidance to promote democracy is just partly the answer. The war in Iraq has become a problem in itself which also must be addressed. In Washington, the war has been linked closely to the efforts to promote democracy in the Middle East. Considering how unpopular this war is in large parts of the region, it is not a mystery that it has become lethal for the efforts in creating a wider understanding for the meaning of spreading freedom and democracy. The war has led to a strengthening of the radical

nationalists and the Islamists in the Arab countries and has generally created some sort of state of occupation which makes it hard for the governments to get on a straight reform course.

Indirectly, the war might have promoted a reform eagerness – even if it has been in a completely different way than the Americans had anticipated: Widespread anger of the war and the Arabian countries' governments lack of ability to prevent it has led to increasing dissatisfaction with status quo in large parts of the Middle East.

Because of today's situation, it is vital that we – both the US and the EU – whole-heartedly engage ourselves in getting the weak democracy in Iraq to function. Today, we have an obvious joint interest in promoting security and democracy in Iraq. The administration of the Iraqi oil is an important test for the Arab countries' perception of the West's genuine motives. If the USA tries to place itself on top of the oil and for instance American companies get all of the contracts, it will confirm the worst Arab suspicion: The democracy-rhetoric was just an excuse in order to invade Iraq.

Correspondingly, both the US and the EU must make a stronger effort in getting a peace process between Israel and Palestine up and running. Many will claim that reforms in the Arab countries in themselves will make the Israel-Palestine conflict easier to solve cf. the thesis of two democracies not entering war against each other. The same people will also – partly justified – claim that the Arab countries simply use this conflict and the war in Iraq as bad excuses for not passing reforms.

It has become rather a national sport in many of the Arab countries to blame others for the injustice the world has put upon them – be it the colonial past, Israel, globalisation or the US. The countries in the region will never move on with this attitude – it is necessary that they recognise that problems will only be solved if the Arab countries take care of them.

Additionally, it has to be mentioned that a solution to the Palestinian conflict in itself is important. And a solution will also make it more difficult for the Arab countries to use the conflict as an excuse to put democratisation on hold.

It is common to draw a parallel between the efforts to reform the Middle East and the efforts to break down Communist dictatorships in Eastern Europe during the Cold War. In the Middle East, there is a certain limited democratic tradition to build upon from the 1930's to the 1950's and again throughout a period from the mid-1980's.

But this parallel is not correct. The Middle East in the 21st century separates itself immensely from Eastern Europe during the Cold War. Back then in Eastern Europe, opposition groups were stronger, they were democratic and they saw the West as a role-model. In the Middle East, the opposition is generally weak and very sceptical towards the West. The countries of the Warsaw Treaty were potential opponents of the West while most of the countries in the Middle East are important security political and economic partners with the West.

In for instance the Baltic countries, the desire for national independency was a driving force behind the democratisation process, because both the US and the EU demanded real democratisation as a condition for membership of NATO and the Union. And while it was Communism that was forced upon Eastern Europe, democracy is looked upon with suspicion and viewed as a Western attempt to weaken and undermine the Arab countries. The liberal reform politicians are often simply viewed as collaborators.

The similarity is more likely to be found in the negative aspects. In the 1990's in Yugoslavia, we saw how several ethnical and national conflicts led to wars and conflicts, when figuratively speaking the lid was taken off with the central government's fall. If several governments in the Middle East – in let's say Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Syria – will fall throughout the coming years, we will see religious and ethnical minorities, who often cross state borders, insisting on their rights and violent clashes being the likely result.

After all, there are grounds for restrained optimism when it comes to the future of the democracy project. Firstly, the media in the Arab countries have become far more critical – look at the TV-stations al-Jazeera and al-Arabiyya or newspapers such as Cairo Times or Saudi Arabia's al-Watan. Even though the Arabian governments do not like what they see and read, it is not likely that this development will be rolled back.

Young people in the Middle East are becoming a part of a global reality with access to the Internet, satellite TV etc. During trips to the Middle East I have continually experienced the fascinating impact the West – and especially the US – have on the young people. Naturally, it is very much our economic wealth, a freer sexual moral, music, films, fashion etc. that impress young people. However, I think the fascination goes deeper and that this fascination also includes our political institutions and our fundamental values. Despite this, many Arabs have a difficult time understanding how we at the same time support absolute monarchs and military dictators.

Secondly, we find examples that are contagious. Young people in the Middle East do also take an interest in the world surrounding them. During the so-called Orange Revolution in Ukraine, TV-stations, in for instance Morocco, broadcasted non-stop reports from the demonstrations in Kiev in November-December 2004. The developments in Turkey also make an impression, despite the historical stereotypes between that country and the Arab world. These years, Turkey is carrying through wide-reaching democratic reforms – with an economic growth of 10 per cent In 2004 – and without risking the country's fundamental stability.

Paradoxically, Israel might be the most important inspiration for the Palestinians regarding democratisation. Most Palestinians strongly disagree with the Israeli government's policy. But many of them frequently visit Israel, and it makes a great impression on them that the people of Israel can remove their politicians through free elections. At the same time, many Palestinians are stunned by the fact that regardless of Israel's secular status, the Israelis have the possibility to practice their religion, if they should wish to.

Thirdly, democracy in the Middle East has now seriously been put on the agenda. Many claim that a democratisation of the Middle East first and foremost is a question of rhetoric. But in international politics, rhetoric itself does play a part – not least when it originates from the US President.

The new Iraq did not become the catalyst for political liberalisation and democracy hoped for. It has been an important and new experience for many Americans that it did not succeed in the Middle East as anticipated and as seen in Eastern Europe in the late 1980's.

Iraq has, after all, to some extent contributed with a momentum for democratic changes. The war has created a background for self-reflection in the Arab countries and hereby been part of setting a democratic agenda. After having experimented with the presentation of different reasons, particularly of security political character, the US has made promotion of democracy – an ideological objective – their top priority.

Fourthly, the authoritarian state in the Arab countries is under pressure technologically, bureaucratically and morally. Even in a country such as Saudi Arabia, we find careful experiments with freer local elections, and the emergence of a certain civil society with women's groups and human rights organisations. It is far too little, and it evolves far too slowly – but the tendency is that these groups do, after all, achieve a certain autonomous status compared to the state.

Whether or not, the reforms will be transformed into more profound political changes is partly dependent on whether or not the reform politicians will succeed in developing an attractive social agenda to complement the more abstract political demands. And whether or not, the more moderate Islamists and secular oppositional groups will succeed and form an alliance.

The West should use a carrot rather than a stick in our future efforts to stimulate democracy. The EU's success in promoting democracy in Eastern Europe is largely connected with the assumption that these countries are possible, future member states of the EU. We do not have a similar offer to the Middle Eastern countries, but less could also be sufficient.

We should offer supplementary benefits and improved trade conditions. Or support the respective countries' memberships of international organisations such as the WTO (World Trade Organisation) and NATO's partnership for peace.

However, the conditions should be that these countries have to carry through more concrete improvements, not alone in the shape of laws, but also through real policies of for instance an enhanced effort against torture, more political rights for women or a new election law that improves the opportunity for public participation. The Western countries should urge the Middle Eastern countries to each work out a plan for the political progresses which can make it easier for the citizens to make their leaders responsible for their actions.

A lot speaks in favour of the EU and the US coordinating our efforts regarding democracy in the Middle East. At least in order to avoid that the Arab countries play off one actor against another. The EU's profile regarding defending Muslims is definitely not impressive, our colonial past and more recently how we let down the people in Bosnia and Darfur. However, after for instance the attacks in Abu Ghraib and in Camp X-Ray on Guantanamo, the Europeans, now have a better basis for promoting human rights in the Arab world. On the other hand, the US has the weight and power it takes to make a difference. The EU does no harm according to the Arab governments, but the EU does not play a central role like the US either.

But the American force can be a two-edged sword. The use of military force in for instance Iraq can partly be blamed for alienating Arab reform politicians from the US. And the pronounced profile and the loud rhetoric might also create dangerous expectations of achieving fast results during the effort to inspire democratic progress.

It is a necessity for Europe to engage in the Middle East alone due to the geographic factors. In the EU, we experience direct political and economic changes in the Middle East, for example the immigration flows. Through the so-called Barcelona Process, the EU has engaged in an economic and cultural cooperation with the Mediterranean countries during the last ten years. But in Europe, we tiptoe when it comes to political reforms as we – the EU – more and more prioritise commercial interests. When it comes to proposing democracy, only the Americans have been capable of setting the agenda since 9/11.

Above all, we must learn more about the Arab countries – and they must learn more about us. Both at expert level and public level, we know far too little about each other. Prejudice is dangerous, because it can lead to stereotypes and hate which then can lead to violence and terror – and to restrictions on travelling and immigration. The Western countries should define a policy for religious and cultural tolerance through cooperation with moderate Arab nations. We have to intervene in the education in schools, make it easier for students to be taught Arabic and introduce exchange agreements for students. But such a policy will only be crowned with luck if it involves civil societies. Here, we could let us be inspired by “Next Stop Soviet” when many people marched to the Soviet Union in the 1980’s in order to break down enemy images and to promote international relations. This way, we might be able to make the long and winding road to Arab democracy somewhat shorter.

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Ala Alyami, Saudi Arabia Foundation
Amy Hawthorne, Carnegie
Anatol Lieven, Carnegie
Anthony Cordesman, CSIS

David L. Mack, Middle East Institute
David Mulenex, MEPI
Ed Gabriel, Arab American Institute
Enzo Viscusi, EPI
Gary Sick, Columbia University
Geoffrey Kemp, Nixon Center
Ian Bremer, euraasia group
Jeremy Sharp, Congress Library
Jon Altermann, CSIS
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Meyrav Wurmser, Hudson Institute
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Zeyno Baran, Nixon Center