

Middle East Democracy Promotion Is Not a One-way Street

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SUMMARY

The U.S. administration is under pressure to revive democracy promotion efforts in the Middle East, but momentum toward political reform has stalled in most of the region. Opposition parties are at low ebb, and governments are more firmly in control than ever. While new forms of activism, such as labor protests and a growing volume of blogging critical of government and opposition parties have become widespread, they have yet to prove effective as means of influencing leaders to change long-standing policies.

The last time a U.S. administration faced such unfavorable circumstances in advancing political reforms was over 30 years ago, when the Helsinki process was launched during the Cold War. That experience taught us that the United States needs to give reluctant interlocutors something they want if it expects them to engage on issues they would rather not address. If Washington wants Arab countries to discuss the universal democratic principles that should underpin their political systems, it needs to be prepared to discuss the universal principles that should underpin its own Middle East policies.

The promotion of democracy, or even of a modicum of effort on political reform, has so far been missing from the Obama administration's Middle East policy. The administration has focused on the toughest issues first, by necessity in the case of Iran and Afghanistan, and by choice in the case of the Arab-Israeli peace process. Political reform and democracy have been put on the back burner, but this is likely to change. Appeals by parts of the U.S. policy community, Arab dissidents, and Middle Eastern and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are putting pressure on the administration to do, or at least say, something beyond the eloquent statements in the president's Cairo speech of June 2009.

The issue of political reform must be addressed. Many Arab countries—equipped with stagnant political systems that are better adapted to maintaining the status quo than to finding solutions to new problems—are facing significant problems. It is not just lack of democracy or neglect for human rights that makes many Arab political systems problematic, although these are serious concerns. It is the apparent incapacity of many governments to respond to looming crises. In the most extreme cases, particularly in Yemen, political reform may be linked to state survival.

The Obama administration should not address political reform in the Middle East by returning to democracy promotion along



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the lines followed by President Bush. His mixture of resounding rhetoric, veiled threats of regime overthrow, and extremely modest on-the-ground programs left behind few concrete changes and a great deal of mistrust. Even more importantly, political conditions in the region are substantially different today. Three developments in particular have altered the political landscape. The first are the changes taking place within Islamist movements, which during the last decade have been the only significant political opposition in Arab countries. The second is the increasing inability of existing institutions and political organizations to capture and channel popular discontent and demands for change. Citizens are not apolitical; rather, they are moving beyond conventional politics in expressing their demands and discontent. The third development is the growing fragility of a small number of Arab states and the much more widespread inadequacy of existing political systems to govern changing countries effectively.

Islamist Movements

Islamist parties were central players in many Arab countries during the 1990s and in the first half of the present decade. During that period they underwent a deep transformation. They chose to participate in the legal political process in their countries, a decision that required a major ideological adjustment on their part: recognition of their respective states' legitimacy, thus an implicit renunciation of the goal of unifying the *umma* (Muslim community) under a single government; acceptance of pluralism and thus of the inevitability of compromise. It was neither an easy transformation nor a complete one, and ideological gray areas as well as internal disputes remained in all movements. But in eight Arab countries (Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Yemen) as well as in Palestine, Islamist movements made the transition to participation and entered the political fray. A series of elections in the first half of the current decade showed that the

strategy was paying off, with all participating Islamist parties winning parliamentary seats. In Algeria, Lebanon, Kuwait, and Yemen they even held cabinet portfolios, and in Palestine they formed the government until external pressure put an end to the experiment.

By the end of decade, the pendulum had swung in the opposite direction. Recent parliamentary or local elections in countries as different from each other as Morocco, Jordan, Egypt, and Kuwait produced Islamist losses. Organizations that a few years earlier were convinced their power would continue to grow started worrying about their survival. The reversal resulted in part from the fact that many incumbent governments, seeking to keep their power intact, increased the repression of their most viable opponents, playing on fears of Islamist extremism and of terrorism. Furthermore, Islamist parties had little to show for their participation: they achieved representation, but have no influence on policies because of the small size of their delegations and of their own inexperience with policy formulation. Furthermore, some of their followers started accusing them of having abandoned Islamic principles for political gains. As a result, Islamist parties saw their support dwindle.

Finally, Islamist parties were never recognized as legitimate political players by the United States and Europe. Even the most moderate Islamist parties, such as the Moroccan Party for Justice and Development, remained somewhat suspect. Western fears that Islamist parties were only participating in the democratic process for tactical reasons and would seek to impose an Islamist state if they won, never dissipated. The Algerian saga of the 1990s—fear of an Islamist election victory in 1992 led the military to seize power, triggering years of conflict during which Islamists and security forces outdid each other in brutality—continue to color perceptions of Islamist movements in the West. So when the Egyptian Muslim Brothers gained 20 percent of the seats in Egypt's 2005 par-

liamentary elections, the United States interpreted the renewed presence of an opposition in the parliament as a setback for democracy, rather than as a gain. And when Hamas won the Palestinian election in January 2006 in an election deemed unusually free and fair by all observers, the United States and European countries refused to deal with the new government unless Hamas immediately accepted the legitimacy of the state of Israel, and they imposed sanctions instead. This was the beginning of a process that subverted any semblance of constitutional legality in Palestine and led to a split between Hamas and Fatah—and between Gaza and the West Bank—that has so far proven impossible to overcome.

The present weakening of Islamist parties that sought to participate in the political system is not a positive development for the future of political reform in the Arab world. Because the secular opposition is extremely ineffectual almost everywhere, the weakening of Islamist parties means the weakening of all opposition, and governments are unlikely to reform if they do not confront domestic pressure and demands. Also, a struggle for influence is underway in many Islamist parties and movements—for example, in Jordan, Egypt, and Algeria—and the reformers are at risk of being sidelined. While no party has yet reversed the decision to participate in the legal political process, some are debating the possibility of sitting out the next parliamentary election. This is happening in the al-Wefaq society in Bahrain, for example, while the Egyptian Muslim Brothers may be prevented from participating by a new election law.

“Good riddance,” some would argue, except that the disenchanted, erstwhile voters who support Islamist movements are not turning into secular liberals. Many are simply opting out of politics, as evident from the extremely low voter turnout in most elections. Some are returning to the early beliefs of the original Islamist movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, and refocusing on da’wa—the project of Islamizing society. Salafi groups,

whose members abide by strict Islamic precepts in their personal lives, are thriving. The spread of social salafism is difficult to document, let alone to quantify, because the groups tend to be small and fragmented, but it is becoming a more visible phenomenon. Social salafism in itself is not a political danger, since it focuses

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on personal behavior, but it can easily acquire political overtones as it spreads. Already in Morocco, the supposedly apolitical Islamic association al-Adl wal-Ihsan is seen as a potentially major political force biding its time.

Beyond Traditional Politics

Formal political processes and political organizations appear increasingly irrelevant in many Arab countries. Low election turnout shows that people are disenchanted with elections and with parties, increasingly including Islamist ones. Precise measurements are difficult to find, because governments routinely exaggerate election participation and opposition groups exaggerate in the opposite direction, but there is no doubt that voter turnout is low.

Citizens are turning to alternative ways of expressing their desire for change. They increasingly display their discontent not through political organizations but through NGOs, blogs, and informal networks established through social media. The immediate effect is sometimes startling—Egyptian Facebook users managed to organize a general strike in April 2008. Like all general strikes, it was short-lived, and an attempt to repeat the feat the following year failed, but it still happened without the help of political parties or labor unions. Egypt is not the sole example of this new activism. Increasingly, social and economic discontent in many countries in North Africa and the Levant

finds expression in wildcat strikes and demonstrations organized by local activists, not by labor unions or political parties.

Bloggers criticize the government but also the political parties, including Islamist ones. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has its own bloggers. And contrary to the widespread assumption that younger members using up-to-date technologies necessarily represent a more modern interpretation of Islam and

days mostly did. The fact that the technology of protest is different today from what it was in the past does not necessarily mean that the new activism will prove more long-lasting. On the other hand, the new activism may prove to be a long-term trend and reshape the political scene in some countries.

To have a lasting impact, the new activism will have to move away from protest and establish a link to the normal politics of the country, the processes that distribute power and control governments and institutions. In most Arab countries, politics has a strong electoral component. For the most part, elections take place regularly in all Arab countries outside the Gulf (and even in the Gulf, Kuwait is an exception, with a strong, though rather unstable, election-based system and the most vigorous parliament in the Arab region). Yet incumbent regimes stay in power, election after election, not because of public support but through a mixture of repression, patronage, and electoral manipulation. For those seeking change and for regime opponents, there are only two choices: participating in elections or resorting to violence. Few organizations resort to violence and in most countries, those that make that choice do not appear to be getting stronger, at least not yet. This means that those seeking change must at some point establish a link to the normal political process and try to influence elections. So far, there is no evidence that people who have sought new avenues for expressing their dissatisfaction and dissent are ready to come back to traditional political

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pressure for reform in their organizations and societies, many instead desire greater ideological purity. There is no apparent correlation between one's choice of technology and socio-political preferences.

The liveliness of this broad area of nontraditional politics stands in sharp contrast to the official political process, where opposition is muted, governments are firmly in control, and the public is seemingly apathetic. The flourishing of nontraditional politics bears watching closely, although its long-term significance is as yet impossible to predict and probably easy to overestimate. While there is no doubt that the ferment is real, nobody can truly assess whether it will last. Today's young bloggers and Facebook users may well settle down and concentrate on their personal lives in the future, as student activists of earlier

BOX

Voter Turnout in Parliamentary Elections

EGYPT	23%	(2005)	
MOROCCO	52%	(2002)	37% (2007)
JORDAN	59%	(2003)	42% (2009)
KUWAIT	65%	(2006)	50% (2009)
BAHRAIN	53%	(2003)	72% (2007)

Seats Won by Islamist Parties

MOROCCO (PJD)	9 (1997)	42 (2002)	46 (2006)*
EGYPT (MB)	17 (1999)	88 (2005)	
KUWAIT (ICM)	6 (2006)	1 (2009)	
JORDAN (IAF)	17 (2003)	6 (2007)	

* The number of seats gained in the 2006 elections is misleading, as the PJD lost 1 million votes compared to 2002.

activity. This makes the political scene in Arab countries difficult terrain indeed in which to promote political reform.

State Fragility and Inadequate Political Systems

The final issue the Obama administration has to take into consideration if it wants to embark on a credible, long-term program of promoting political reform is that many Arab countries suffer not only from a severe deficit of democracy, as argued by successive Arab Human Development Reports, but also from a deficit of capacity to govern effectively, and the situation is getting worse. The deficit of democracy is a general problem across the region, but there are considerable variations both in the type and extent of governance weaknesses. In some countries, particularly in the Gulf, the rapid transformation of economy and society has not been accompanied by an equally rapid transformation of governance systems, creating inevitable tensions. In another large group of countries, there is a serious imbalance between the government's capacity to control in a negative sense—that is, keep things from happening of which it disapproves—and its capacity to improve economic performance or deliver needed services. This is a common problem in countries like Algeria, Libya, Egypt, and Syria: strong, authoritarian regimes but ineffective governance.

There should be no illusion that democratic openings in such countries would lead to better governance: regimes that face competitive elections are indeed under pressure to deliver something to their citizens to retain their support. But many find it much easier to deliver through patronage and populist gestures that earn votes but further bankrupt the country, rather than by tackling serious underlying problems.

Finally, there are extreme cases of weakness of state legitimacy and governance capacity that make the democratic deficit pale in comparison: Yemen faces a serious insurgency in the North and a growing secessionist move-

ment in the South and appears incapable of managing its dwindling water resources or planning for the fast-approaching depletion of its oil deposits. Sudan is more divided than ever. And all bets are off on the future of Iraq and the effectiveness of its government as the U.S. presence dwindles. Just addressing the

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democratic deficit probably would not do much to help these countries avoid the possibility of state failure.

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A Broad Agenda

It is only a matter of time before the Obama administration seeks ways to relaunch a political reform agenda in the Middle East. In fact, some discussions are already taking place, although there is no indication that an approach has yet taken shape. In the early months of his administration, buoyed by his popularity across the Arab world, expectations of a breakthrough in the Arab–Israeli peace process and in negotiations with Iran, President Obama could ignore the issue of political reform. But the hope for quick breakthroughs has been replaced by the certainty that these issues will require a long, hard slog with uncertain results at the end. The Arab press is now openly questioning Obama's determination to change U.S. policies in the region and denouncing his acquiescence to the Israeli government, and it is only a matter of time before it starts claiming that he has abandoned the political reform agenda. In addition, there is renewed concern that countries with large problems but sclerotic governments, like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, could

face a crisis down the road if they do not take corrective steps.

The tools that the United States has used since the end of the Cold War to promote political reform were designed for different and more promising conditions. Programs devised to bolster and strengthen newly formed democratic governments certainly do not apply to the Middle East, where the incumbent regimes are more firmly in control than they were even

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a few years ago. It is pointless to strengthen parliaments if they are controlled by government supporters or appointees, or to work to improve the independence of the judiciary when emergency laws transfer sensitive trials to special courts.

Nor are these tools useful in countries where the government, although authoritarian, cannot control the entire country and the state itself is threatened. In the short run, a more democratic Yemeni government would still have to battle insurrection in the North and secession in the South. The United States, furthermore, has little leverage with many Arab countries. Programs designed to press relatively fragile aid-dependent governments to open political space convinced some African leaders to hold multiparty elections because of their need for continued economic assistance. But many Arab countries are not dependent on U.S. assistance; on the contrary, it is the United States that is dependent on their oil. Countries that receive significant amounts of American aid already pay the United States back in cooperation on counterterrorism programs or political concessions toward Israel. Suspending aid to such countries would undermine U.S. interests.

The fallback solution in democracy promotion, namely, supporting organizations of civil society and political parties, is unlikely to have much impact in countries that in recent years have systematically enacted laws that close political space for independent organizations. Finally, the most radical approach to democracy that has been used at times—encouraging a “velvet revolution”—is not really an option except in a country where there is already a high level of domestic mobilization. Such mobilization does not exist in any Arab country at present. In any case, it remains open to debate whether external assistance was ever a determining factor in the upheavals in Serbia, Ukraine, or Georgia.

There is, in other words, no obvious way for the United States to promote political reform in the Arab world. It must put pressure on Arab governments, but it does not have the power to force them to do what they do not want to do, and it does not have the moral authority to convince regimes to change or to inspire the opposition. Public approval ratings of the United States are creeping up from the single digit figures to which they plummeted under the Bush administration, but they remain dismally low. This means that if the Obama administration hopes to start a serious process that offers some hope for change, it has to offer something that makes it worthwhile for Arab governments to respond.

To find an even vaguely analogous situation, it is necessary to go back to the Cold War and the conditions that existed in the communist bloc when the process leading to the Helsinki Final Act was launched. Like Arab governments today, the Soviet Union was not under irresistible internal pressure to embark on a dialogue on reform and human rights, and certainly not with the United States. It did so because the quid pro quo was official recognition of the post–World War II borders in Europe. The Helsinki process was an enormously ambitious undertaking, covering a wide array of issues, and the Obama administration should not undertake an effort of simi-

lar scope. Nevertheless, there are lessons to be learned from the Helsinki process. The first is that the United States cannot get governments that do not feel threatened domestically to engage in a serious discussion of political reform if it is not willing to offer something in return that is very important to them. Second, the United States cannot decree what changes need to take place, but needs to negotiate an understanding.

What the United States could offer Arab countries as a quid pro quo in a serious process of promoting political reform is an agreement about the principles, international laws, and conventions that all parties are committed to respecting. Arab countries have long complained that the United States violates many international principles in its Middle East policies. Inevitably, much of the criticism centers on U.S. policies concerning Israel; for example, alleged American tolerance of Israeli transgressions of international laws regarding refugees or the conduct of occupying powers. But Arab governments also question the U.S. interpretation of the applicability of the Geneva conventions to Iraq or Guantanamo and accuse Washington of applying different standards to different countries—for example, holding President Omar Bashir accountable for killings in Sudan but seeking to bury the Goldstone report alleging Israeli war crimes during the war in Gaza or criticizing Arab countries for not holding fair elections, while rejecting the legitimacy of Hamas's victory in Palestine in an election widely deemed fair.

This does not mean that the criticisms of Arab countries are always justified. But if the United States wants to convince Arab governments that its demands for reform are not undue interference in their internal affairs, but adherence to universal principles, it is more likely to succeed if it is willing to discuss which universal principle should also apply to American policies in the Middle East. Opening a discussion on such issues and showing willingness to bring its own policies in line with principles it claims are universal would

provide the United States with some leverage to force Arab countries to look at their own shortcomings, while also giving greater clarity and credibility to U.S. policies. Which issues would be put on the table in an American–Arab dialogue on reform, and which principles all countries would need to show adherence to, would be the object of negotiations, as they were at Helsinki.

There is, of course, a much easier way for the Obama administration to show that the United States still cares about political reform in the Middle East, one that would not require the United States to adjust its own policies. It could go back to exhorting Arab governments to change; it could launch new initiatives on women's rights or education; it could even become more daring and enter into a dialogue with Islamist parties. Given the conditions that exist in the Arab world now, such steps would make little difference and do nothing to restore the United States' much-eroded credibility on the subject of democracy and political reform. They would allow the Obama administration to check the box of democracy promotion on its agenda, but would accomplish nothing else. If we believe that political reform in the Arab world is important not only to the welfare of Arab citizens but also to the region's stability and to U.S. security, checking a box is not enough. ■

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RESOURCES

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Democracy Promotion in the Middle East: Restoring Credibility, Marina Ottaway, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Brief no. 60, June 2008, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/pb_60_ottaway_final.pdf.

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