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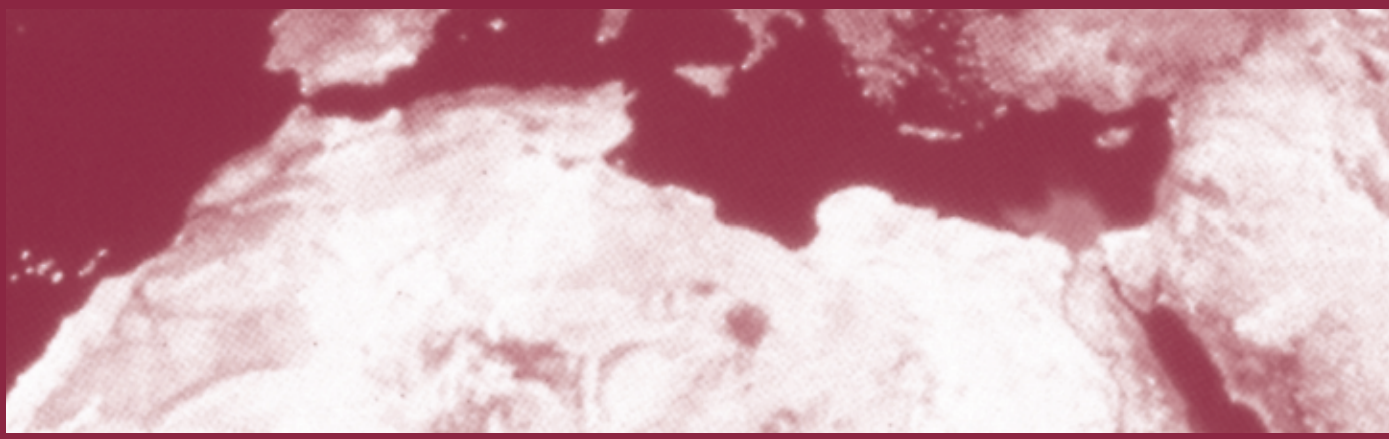
Democracy and Security in the Middle East



Richard Youngs

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Democracy and Security in the Middle East

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March 2006

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International perspectives on the Middle East have been dominated since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 by a reinvigorated debate over the relationship between the region's internal politics, on the one hand, and its generation of security challenges, on the other hand. The Hamas victory in Palestinian elections in January 2006 has compounded the salience of such deliberations. This debate has polarised between two competing positions. At one extreme, pressure for democratic reform in the Middle East has been presented by some as the primary, fail-safe means of enhancing Western security and countering international terrorism. At the other extreme, sceptics of this new focus on democracy promotion in the Middle East have warned that political liberalisation would at best have negligible impact on the incidence of terrorism, and at worst actually facilitate the further flourishing of violence and anti-Western sentiment. This paper argues that *both* these positions are unsatisfactory, and appeals for a more nuanced view that neither reifies nor discounts the potential strategic benefit that would flow from political change in the Middle East.

Democracy's Virtue

An extensive body of academic work has catalogued a well-established range of reasons why it might be reasonable to expect political pluralism to enhance peace and stability. A vast number of standard 'democratic peace' studies profess to demonstrate that democracies are less prone to engage in international conflict. Democracy is held to be predicated upon the principles of tolerance and compromise, and to provide opportunities for the peaceful articulation of social and economic grievances. Democracy's advocates assert that anti-Westernism expressed democratically is less likely to assume violent form, while political repression by necessity drives discontent into illegal and radical forms. Cross-cutting patterns of associative activity are routinely held to be integral to the moderation of individual actions and values. Authoritarianism, it is argued, can only hope to suppress grievances, in increasingly costly and precarious fashion. Freedom of information also ensures scrutiny of political actions that risk stoking harmful and costly conflict. Moreover, the same norms of mutual compromise that underpin democracy internally are, it is claimed, invariably also reflected in democracies' external behaviour. It is argued that democratic leaders will be constrained by public opinion from military adventurism and immoderation in their external comportment. The fragility of many new democracies may even act as an added disincentive for governments to neglect urgent domestic demands to press external interests in destabilising fashion. It is frequently argued that governments operating in a democratic context tend to be more predictable in their foreign policy, an advantage compounded by the transparency of political debate to international scrutiny.

Analysts have also suggested that democracies tend to be more embedded in mutually constraining economic interdependencies. A triangle of mutually reinforcing relations is seen as having emerged between democracy, trade and membership of international organisations. In short, for a variety of structural, political and economic reasons, the reshaping of domestic political structures is presented by many as essential for international security and a far firmer basis for stability than strategies predicated on containment and deterrence.[1]

Much of this general conceptual logic has increasingly been judged to have particular pertinence to the West's relations with the Middle East. Pages could be filled with excerpts from the post-9/11 speeches of US and

1 B. Russett and J. Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (New York: Norton, 2001); J. L. Ray, *Democracy and International Conflict: An Evaluation of the Democratic Peace Proposition* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995); International IDEA, *Democracy and Deep-Rooted Conflict: Options for Negotiators* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 1998); T. Gurr, 'Ethnic Warfare on the Wane', *Foreign Affairs* 79, 3 (2001): 52–64; K. Schultz, 'Do Democratic Institutions Constrain or Inform? Contrasting Two Institutional Perspectives on Democracy and War', *International Organisation* 53, 2 (1999): 233–66.

European ministers and representatives of international institutions attesting to a declared recognition that achieving sustainable security requires promoting democracy in the Middle East. Well-known citations from president Bush's speeches have been echoed, often with greater depth, in the pronouncements and policy statements of European governments. Such commitments have moulded themselves into what is presented as a new Western approach to security in the Middle East, supposedly focused on attacking the roots of international terrorism, as opposed merely to containing its symptoms.

Both official and academic arguments have emphasised democracy's largely indirect and long-term utility. The argument has not primarily been that Middle Eastern democratisation would usher in governments either overtly more favourable to the West or more effective in any direct sense in containing terrorism. Rather, encouragement of pluralism has been advocated as a means of 'draining the swamp', of drying up the 'pool of discontent' seen as having been nourished by autocratic repression in the only region of the world still to lack a fully fledged democracy. The seminal 2002 Arab Human Development Report itself concurred with –and did much to disseminate and legitimise in the Middle East– the contention that democracy's absence has been a root cause of economic deprivation, which in turn has bred such pervasive popular frustration.[2] In relation to Egypt it has been argued that the regime's prohibition of Islamist political parties is what has driven Islamism into a highly conservative form of influence through the religious establishment.[3]

It has, of course, been increasingly asserted that Middle Eastern resentment against the West can be traced to Western support for the region's repressive authoritarian regimes. If Middle East authoritarianism was initially welcomed by the West as a bulwark against resurgent Islam, its limited success in fulfilling this function has become increasingly patent. Across the region, nominally pro-Western autocrats have stoked up anti-Western feeling and played to Islamist opinion in order to shore up the precarious legitimacy of their own rule. This was a particularly notable trend during the late 1990s in Egypt and Jordan and has *inter alia* compromised regimes' containment of opposition to the Middle East peace process. By the end of the 1990s, the West's 'client' regimes appeared often to be acting in a manner more antithetical than helpful to Western strategic interests.[4] Middle Eastern regimes have in practice neither been cocooned from domestic pressures nor provided the material basis and incentive for their populations' moderation.

If the West's fear had long been that democracy would bring to power Islamist-oriented governments, in the post-9/11 environment greater faith appeared to be invested in the moderating impact that democratic process would itself be likely to have on groups currently espousing radical positions. Many analysts suggest that if democracy enabled Islamists to assume power, the latter's mystic appeal would soon dissolve and their so-far vague recipes for tackling economic and social imperatives take firmer and more realistic shape. Arab regimes were increasingly perceived to have exaggerated the Islamist 'threat' in an attempt to purchase the indulgence of Western governments for their – regimes' – refusal to implement political reforms. Arab regimes were seen to have played a self-serving game: the more instability that autocracy bred, the easier it had been for regimes to convince the West that this very authoritarianism had to be tightened. Democracy would, it was argued, help break this Gordian knot.

Indeed, if there has been a defining feature of post-9/11 intellectual debates it has resided in the ubiquitous warnings against 'Islam' being seen as a threat to the West. Increasingly, broader recognition

2 United Nations, *Arab Human Development Report* (Geneva: UN, 2002), chap. 10.

3 B. Kodmani 'The Dangers of Political Exclusion: Egypt's Islamist Problem', Carnegie Working Paper 63, October 2005, Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

4 F. Halliday, *Two Hours that Shook the World* (London: Saqi, 2002): 124.

has emerged of the extent to which contemporary trends in Islam have been determined by prevailing political contexts. The vast majority of analysts and policymakers alike have repeatedly rejected the notion that Islam should be conceived as a monolithic assault against Western values. It has been broadly acknowledged that the most resonant 'clash' exists between different constituencies *within* the Muslim world, rather than across civilisational fault-lines. While some die-hard Orientalists of course remain, to most observers the fluidity and variety of Islamist political ideology has become more striking, with much ostensibly Islamist discourse in fact replaying many secular and material dimensions of the third world populism witnessed in other regions. The perennially raised question of whether Islam and democracy are compatible over the long term has for most analysts become a non-debate. Organisations such as the Moroccan Party of Justice and Development, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Jordanian Islamic Action Front have issued increasingly unqualified pronouncements in favour of multi-party democracy. Such change in both the self-definition and external intellectual perceptions of political Islam has had bearing upon the judgements made about the likely impact of democratisation in the Middle East. Crucial to the pro-democracy argument is an optimism that support for democratisation appears increasingly to be going with the grain of ideological evolution in the Middle East. In this context, democracy promotion is more of a well-grounded hedged-bet on the future than an open invitation to the West's declared 'enemies'.

In sum, it is the entwining of new strategic thinking and (apparently) less 'essentialist' readings of Islam that has for many observers and policy-makers made the case for democracy so much more potent. This is the context that has made the promotion of democracy such a prominent concern, and one so central to the study of the changing dynamics of Middle Eastern politics.

The Case Against

As firmly as democracy has been advocated as an essential strand of Western security strategies in the wake of 9/11, so has its value to efforts to mitigate international terrorism been questioned. Western governments have been criticised for mistakenly moving from a strategic policy based on containment to an unfounded assumption that efforts to democratise the Middle East can provide an antidote to terrorism. Critics charge that the pendulum has swung too far from a prioritisation of alliance-building to a simplistic formulation of democracy as strategic panacea.

The doubts raised against democracy can be broken down into a number of different concerns. The warning most commonly forwarded is that in bringing to power anti-Western Islamists democratisation in the Middle East would be inimical to security interests.[5] Recent trends in the Middle East certainly suggest that Islamists stand well positioned to reap the benefits of more open and genuinely competitive elections. While press attention has focused primarily on the rise and eventual electoral victory of Hamas, Islamist opposition groups have since 2001 also made strong showings in Morocco, Algeria, Egypt and Kuwait, and in Saudi Arabia's 2005 municipal elections.

On this democracy's advocates would mostly not demur. Crucially, however, sceptics question the optimistic assumption that participation in democratic politics and, probably, in government would be likely to seduce Islamists into moderation. Opinion polls indeed suggest there is little correlation between relative degrees of political repression in the Middle East and 'radicalism'. Some of the most virulently anti-Western views have been registered in Jordan and Morocco – countries enjoying, of course, some of the most generous political rights in the Arab world and whose political systems have allowed increased representation

5 For one recent version of this argument see F. Gregory Gause III 'Can Democracy Stop Terrorism?', *Foreign Affairs,* September/October 2005

of Islamist parties. Questioning the empirical evidence offered to substantiate the democracy-security link, it has been pointed out that many authoritarian regimes have not bred radicalism, while the latter has risen in many established democracies.[6] In light of this, two experts draw attention to the uncomfortable fact that the most successful control of radical Islamist groups has been secured through repressive measures in states such as Tunisia, Algeria and Egypt, this rebutting the 'wishful thinking' that democracy is a 'cure-all for terrorism.'[7] After performing strongly in Egypt's parliamentary elections at the end of 2005, several members of the Muslim Brotherhood leadership dismissed suggestions that greater political participation would involve the group being more willing to recognise Israel.[8] Hamas pronouncements after the organisation's January 2006 electoral victory struck an equally uncompromising tone.

Conceptually, many of the arguments relating to democracy's supposed virtues have emerged from work either on the 'democratic peace' or on conflict resolution. Arguably, the conclusions of such work have been extrapolated too readily to the issue of Middle Eastern instability and Islamist-linked international terrorism when it in fact speaks to a quite different set of issues. Democratic peace theorists might have observed that wealthy, Western democracies have not gone to war with each other, but it would be wrong to suppose from this that poorer, more turbulent societies become more peaceable through democratisation, given their more acute economic difficulties and challenging regional environment. In this sense, it is contended that democracy is likely to be harmful and destabilising without a number of preconditions having met, in particular, the existence of national consensus and strong state institutions.[9] It is argued, moreover, that recent evidence casts doubt on the contention that non-democracies are more reluctant to embed themselves in networks of mutual interdependencies, thus questioning one of the central tenets of the democratic peace thesis.[10] It has similarly been suggested that democracy's value is heavily conditioned by the broader regional context, and may often have more to do with the existence of cooperative ventures between groups of neighbouring states that happen to be democratic than the intrinsic virtues of democracy per se.[11]

In addition, danger lies in extending evidence of democracy's virtue in managing context-specific, low-level societal tension, in particular in Africa's 'failed states', to a conviction that governance reform is pertinent to combating the qualitatively distinct threat of Al Qaeda. Crucially, most work on democracy and security has focused on either full-scale war between states or internal ethnic conflict; it has related less directly to soft security challenges involving sub-state actors and low-level social and ideational tensions. Democracy's presumed relevance to such concerns is so far based more on intuitive reasoning than detailed empirical study.

In short, the proposition that internal democratic accountability engenders moderation in external behaviour is widely questioned, especially when applied to the context of the Middle East. Indeed, it might be argued that democratic leaders may actually have greater incentive to harden external positions to divert attention from their domestic constraints. Far from being a moderating effect, liberated electorates might

6 Sceptics include J. Mearsheimer (1990) 'Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War', *International Security* 15, 1(1990): 5–56; E. Mansfield and J. Snyder, 'Democratisation and the Danger of War', *International Security* 20, 1 (1995); C. Gelpi, 'Democratic Diversions: Governmental Structure and Externalisation of Domestic Conflict', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41, 2 (1997): 255–87; T. Barkawi and M. Laffey, 'The Imperial Peace: Democracy, Force and Globalisation', *European Journal of International Relations* 5, 4 (1999): 403–34; E. Cousens and C. Kumar, eds., *Peacebuilding as Politics: Cultivating Peace in Fragile Societies* (Boulder, Colo: Lynne Rienner, 2001); H. Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?;* E. Mansfield and J. Snyder 'Democratic Transitions, Institutional Strength, and War', *International Organisation* 56, 2 (2002): 297–338; F. Zakaria, 'The Rise of Illiberal Democracy', *Foreign Affairs,* (1997); J. Gowa, *Ballots and Bullets: The Elusive Democratic Peace* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999)

7 T. Carothers and M. Ottaway M. (2004) 'Middle East Democracy', *Foreign Policy,* Nov-Dec 2004

8 Democracy Digest 2/12, 22 December 2005:2

9 E. Mansfield and J. Snyder 'Prone to Violence', *The National Interest,* Winter 2005/6

10 D. Geller and J. Singer, *Nations at War: A Scientific Study of International Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)

11 K. Gleditsch and M. Ward, 'War and Peace in Space and Time: The Role of Democratisation', *International Studies Quarterly* 44, 1 (2000): 1–29

push democratic governments in a more radical direction, democracy threatening to be a spark igniting the tinderbox of Middle Eastern resentment. Moreover, the most hard-edged realist might caution that democracies tend to make the stronger, more technologically advanced strategic rivals and that encouraging such advancement in the Middle East would, contrary to all 'democratic peace' rhetoric suggesting otherwise, not ultimately sit easily with a correct reading of realpolitik's exigencies.

A different critique has focused not on democracy per se, but the inadvisability of Western governments championing and actively promoting political liberalisation. Even if democracy were to be beneficial, one standard argument is that it would be counter-productive for the West to seek to be its midwife. Critics have contended that with democracy promotion conceived in too instrumental a fashion through the lens of Western self-interest, it threatens actually to increase instability and violence, especially in the Middle East.[12] Critics predict that the backlash against the West occasioned by efforts to 'impose' democracy are likely to outweigh any internal benefits from political liberalisation.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, but also beguilingly, such an incipient 'backlash' has come from two, opposing directions. The US is pilloried for now seeking heavy-handedly to 'impose' democratic values for its own interest, but also berated for still in practice being ambivalent over political opening in the Middle East. It is salutary for Western policy-makers to note that many polls regularly confirm that Arab citizens do not believe the West, and the US in particular, to be genuinely interested in backing democratic change. If Arab views are often frustrating - admonishing the West in one breath for backing authoritarian regimes, and in the next for 'interfering' when commitments to democracy promotion are forthcoming - this to the sceptic merely reinforces the point that meddling in the region's internal politics can only be prejudicial for the West.

A further, and also long-standing concern relates to the *process* of democratic change. It is commonly observed that transitions from authoritarianism to democracy have invariably involved instability, as new coalitions between domestic groups constantly shift and the frustration of newly raised expectations feeds into growing support for nationalist platforms. Afghanistan and Iraq might now be cited as dramatic examples of this transition predicament; instability coinciding with incipient change in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Morocco could also be seen as offering it some corroboration.

Beyond these debates over how democracy would reconfigure internal Arab politics, other analysts have simply questioned the whole premise that security is a matter related to forms of political system. Traditional realists have continued to conceive of security as the product of the international system's structure far more than of the nature of domestic political systems. Strategic issues, they insist, must in this sense be interpreted as revolving around international alliances, not internal political changes. Structuralist, 'core-periphery' interpretations of the Middle East see the struggle for effective autonomy as the primary factor explaining relations with the West. Incongruence between the artificial territorial boundaries imposed by colonial powers and Arab identity continue to militate against security-enhancing democratisation in the Middle East. Antagonism towards the West and internal tensions emanate, it is argued, from overarching structural constraints, likely to endure beyond any changes to internal political structures.[13]

Such perspectives relate closely to the familiar argument that Middle Eastern antipathy towards the West derives principally from the nature of international policies towards the Arab-Israeli conflict. If 9/11 shone a stronger spotlight on the Middle East's lack of democracy, for many it rather merely reinforced the urgency of Palestinian self-determination. It is, of course, habitually asserted that perceived Western connivance in the continuing absence of a Palestinian

12 E. Hobsbawm (2004) 'Spreading Democracy', *Foreign Policy* Sept-Oct 2004

13 R. Hinnebusch, *The International Politics of the Middle East* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003)

state does more than anything to drive young men, and increasingly women, to perpetrate violence. For many observers, Palestinian statehood continues massively to outweigh the issue of democratisation in its relevance to insecurity's explanatory roots.

From the realist angle it is in turn suggested that the West's own focus should be directly on Arab regimes' foreign policies and not on the nature of their internal power structures. It is suggested that efforts to promote democracy merely risk wasting negotiating capital more usefully expended directly on constraining states' external actions. Alternatively, from a more radical and economic perspective, it has long been held that conflict and instability are products of the unequal distribution of economic resources, and that as long as economic shortages and injustices remain embedded within the prevailing structure of the international system, national level democracy appears an increasingly hollow vessel.

This argument does not so much suggest that Middle Eastern democratisation would be harmful or that Western nations should not encourage change where possible, but rather contends that whether democracy is present or absent simply has little bearing on terrorism. Hence, it is routinely pointed out that terrorist acts have in recent decades wreaked havoc in democratic states such as the UK, Spain, Italy and Germany. The fact that those who carried out the 7 July 2005 bombings in London were British citizens was one of the most sobering falsifications of the notion that all terrorists are citizens angered into violent action by their labouring under repressive Middle Eastern regimes. The India-China comparison is also routinely raised to democracy's disadvantage, violent acts in democratic India exceeding those in authoritarian China. Indeed, where the India-China contrast has for many years been suggested to cast doubt over the presumed link between democracy and economic development, it has more recently served to render questionable the link between democracy and security.

Sceptics also question the 'pool of discontent' argument, pointing out that even if terrorists benefit from a 'support network' amongst politically repressed citizens, it still requires only a handful of individuals to execute a violent act. Even if a perfect, pristine form of democracy took root across the Middle East, to widespread popular support, it would be wholly unconvincing to think that even this scenario could placate every actual or potential radical. More than anything else, perhaps, modern conflict's asymmetry is democracy's impotence.

In a slightly weaker version of the sceptical perspective, the conclusion that many analysts have reached on the basis of conceptual doubts over democracy's virtue is that the key changes needed in the Middle East are not precisely *democratic* changes. Many analysts have suggested that international efforts should focus on strengthening local institutional forms that improve human rights norms without entailing wholesale democratisation. An 'Arab form' of political reform is often advocated, predicated on traditional organisations such as the mosque, the neighbourhood or village, the tribe, professional associations, and syndicates, rather than Western-style civil society groups. This echoes a more general argument that liberalism *instead of* democracy is best suited to attaining social calm and stability. A 'thick web of liberal institutions' should, it has been argued, take precedence over any consideration of formal electoral democracy that can simply encourage competitive leaders to ratchet-up hard-line, populist positions.[14] Notably, relatively technical good governance measures have often been advocated in order to secure cleaner, less arbitrary, and less corrupt government, and these values held to be of far greater concern to citizens than Western-style liberal democracy. Indeed, improved respect for basic rights has been advocated post-September 11 as a means of actually helping to head off the uncertainties of regime change and full democratisation.[15]

14 J. Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratisation and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: Norton, 2001)

15 M. Indyck, 'Back to the Bazaar', *Foreign Affairs* (2002); A. R. Norton (1997) 'Political Reform in the Middle East' in L. Guazzone, ed., *The Middle East in Global Change* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997); M. Salla, 'Political Islam and the West: A New Cold War or Convergence?', *Third World Quarterly* 18, 4 (1997): 729–42; S. Sarsar, 'Can Democracy Prevail?' *Middle East Quarterly* 7, 1 (2000): 47; V. Langhor, 'An Exit for Arab Autocracy', *Journal of Democracy* 13, 3(2002): 116–22.

Towards a More Measured View

The challenge is to chart a course between these two poles of security debates in the Middle East. Western policymakers' focus on democracy promotion is a welcome and necessary corrective to traditional security doctrines that for so long failed to look inside the black box of the nation state to investigate the domestic roots of instability. However, the pendulum is indeed in danger of swinging too far in the opposite direction, if too much is expected of democracy as an instrument for security-enhancement. The design of Western policies must not presume democracy to be a panacea for post-September 11 challenges. Rather, the complex interrelationship between political reform and ongoing processes of economic and social change must be reflected upon critically if concrete policies aimed at promoting democracy are to have the positive security benefits desired of them.

Both extremes of the argument over the relationship between democracy and security often tend toward the simplistic. Democracy's advocates risk holding the lack of political liberalisation too overwhelmingly to be the primary cause of the Middle East's own ills, as well as of the region's 'export' of international terrorism. The 'democracy as panacea' exaggeration posits too firm a link between domestic political change and external security issues. But the 'democracy will be harmful' line itself adopts too static a view. The familiar critique is to suggest that certain 'preconditions' – economic development, a decline in nationalism, civic-building consensus - need to be fulfilled before democratisation can be expected to proceed smoothly and beneficially. This argument underplays the extent to which the nature of politics itself influences progress on such 'preconditions'. It fails to factor in how democratic change itself impacts on cognitive identities and the worldviews of political actors as part of a process of adaptation.

Many sceptics also err in dismissing the importance of domestic politics, often coming close to suggesting that most problems associated with the region would dissipate if the US modified its foreign policies, in particular in relation to Palestine and Iraq. Curiously, this questioning of the independent impact of domestic politics has equally characterised conservative and progressive critiques of the democratisation agenda.

It has become standard to warn that political change should rightfully be gradual. True, but scarcely illuminating, it might be felt. It should not be forgotten that debates over political reform have been on the agenda in the Middle East for over two decades, with initial changes having accompanied structural adjustment programmes in the mid-1980s. It is of course undeniably the case that political liberalisation can be destabilising if undertaken 'too quickly'. But with activity around political reform having fluctuated back and forth for twenty years in the Middle East one might enquire how much more 'gradual' should 'gradual change' be? Does the Middle East experience not suggest that 'democracy deferred' can be as worrying a phenomenon as 'democracy precipitated'? It is entirely convincing to caution that state infrastructure is warranted prior to democratic transition: but can *étatiste* Middle Eastern regimes really be said to suffer a *deficit* of state institutions? Moreover, this would hardly seem to represent a lacuna in international policies, given that for many years external actors have been funding state capacity-building even as they have eschewed democracy assistance proper.

Both sides of the divide forward their arguments with remarkable certainty. Yet the truth is that we can probably not predict with any convincing certainty how 'democracy's drama' would unfold in the Middle East or what broad ramifications it would visit upon the region. If there is a convincing conclusion to be drawn from the rich literature on democracy and international relations it is that democracy itself can have a dramatically varying impact across different states, strategic contexts and time periods. The potency of path-dependency in democratic change militates

against overly confident prediction – especially at a moment when debate is so vivid over the extent to which the Middle East's internal politics really are on the brink of meaningful change.

Events in Iraq have complicated and even distorted the picture. Iraq's post-invasion turmoil has clearly provided strong argument to those emphasising that violence is invariably associated with political transitions. At the very least, it must be recognised that the jury is still out on whether democratisation in Iraq can eventually prove to be a stabilising force. The situation in Iraq continues to fluctuate. Optimism that the dynamics of democratic inclusiveness were beginning to work took root after a high Sunni turn out in December 2005's elections. At the time of writing, pessimism has returned with the latest wave of sectarian attacks. What has been unconvincing is the tendency of *both* sides of the argument to generalise from their respective readings of events in Iraq to the issue of democratisation more broadly across the Middle East. Iraq so far conclusively demonstrates *neither* that democracy is doomed to breed bloody insurrection or that the fall of dictatorship necessarily sets the foundations for rights-sensitive stabilisation.

While many of the doubts raised against democracy are convincing, the conceptual groundings from which they are argued commonly lead critics to be overly dismissive of democracy's potential merit. One shortcoming, witnessed especially in the United States, is the tendency implicitly to assume that the situation is one of the West/ US deciding whether democracy is a good thing or not in the face of a passive Middle East. In reality, of course, democracy's fate is unlikely to be the West's to decide. Western policy is more a reactive than independent variable, and security calculations must be made with this in mind. Even if the sceptics' concerns are fully acknowledged, what can perhaps be argued with some certainty is that as and when the Middle East's political plates begin to shift it would breed resentment if the West sought actively to *discourage* change.

It is particularly irritating – for those both in the Middle East and in other Western states – that debates over democracy promotion are so often couched in a discourse of 'US values'. Both the enthusiasts and the sceptics regularly conflate – or seem constantly a hair's breadth away from conflating – their respective views on democracy with their position on the US seeking to spread *its* values. Democracy must, rather, be carefully judged on its own merits. Presenting the argument in terms of 'our security' being served by spreading 'our values' – in fact a favourite formulation not only of president Bush but also of British prime-minister, Tony Blair – could hardly be better designed to engender counter-productive responses to democracy promotion efforts. Where democracy support is aimed at ensuring that Arabs' *own* values and aspirations are not hindered from outside, a more comprehensive approach to political change is invited.

Such a starting point offers greater possibility of teasing out democracy's potential, linking support for political reform organically to a broader range of change in the region. A truly holistic approach would be attentive to the pitfalls of political rupture unsynchronised with underlying structural adaptation of economy and social life. A strategy that fully contextualised political reform within ongoing processes of social, religious and economic change in the Arab world might not magic away strategic threats, but it would go some way to preparing the foundations for the kind of comprehensive transformation that would render containment-based security less necessary. The value of support for democracy should not be discounted, but must be made to mesh with issues of a structural nature - and certainly not merely take the form of backing easily-accessible pro-Western democracy activists.

Related to this, care must also be taken not to confuse the challenge of international terrorism with that of anti-Westernism. Again, from both sides of the debate views on the latter come dangerously close to determining the advocated strategy towards democracy. This of course leads onto the broader point, well beyond the scope of this paper, of what issues

actually constitute (or are 'intersubjectively constructed' to constitute, as constructivists would contend) 'security threats' to the West. At a minimum, it would appear imperative less unthinkingly to conflate different forms or levels of 'securitised' issue. International terrorism, for example, is subject to a set of causal dynamics in crucial ways quite distinct from the soft security challenges linked to internal state-society pathologies. It might indeed be asked whether the central issue is really that of governmental anti-Westernism. Governments highly critical of the West exist in many places of the world without these being seen to represent existential security threats. It might be proffered that a viable trade off is at stake, governments more critical of Western policies externally actually helping to provide a stabilising 'pressure valve' internally. Paradoxically, it might prove to be in the West's interest to promote democracy especially where it seems most strongly *not* to be in its interest to do so.

One mistaken conclusion to flow from the 'either/or' extremes of prevailing debate is that the West should above all be selective in its focus on encouraging democracy in the Middle East. This argument contends that Western governments should back political change where secular pro-Western forces are currently strong and could be expected to gain significant power democratically – as, for example, in Morocco and Lebanon. Where this is not the case, it is suggested that the West should discourage democratisation in the short-term and seek rather to build-up pro-Western secular forces as a precursor to any eventual democratic transition.[16] Whatever one's general degree of doubt over democracy, it would seem reasonable to caution that this is exactly what the West should *not* seek to do. If one thing would seem guaranteed to engender resentment amongst Arab populations it would be an attempt directly to engineer politics to the West's perceived advantage, on the basis of applying different standards between Middle Eastern states.

It has, rightly, been argued that efforts to encourage democracy in the Arab world should be conceived as having potentially positive effects for security, both within and beyond the Middle East, but that democratisation should also be recognised as only one among many pertinent variables.[17] The danger so far does not appear to lie in the West blindly imposing democracy, but rather in being ultra-cautious in according substance to rhetorical commitments to support political change – such caution probably being more pronounced in Europe than the United States. Indeed, it is the other elements of counter-terrorism strategy that have in fact predominated, in particular through cooperation between Western and Arab security forces and intelligence services. Looking carefully at the substance and resource allocations of Western policies it would seem unconvincing to suggest that they have in practice imprudently abandoned the dictates of short-term realism. Rather, the challenge resides in ensuring that traditional and democracy-based security strategies, which Western governments will likely pursue in parallel, do not undermine each other. The tension between these dynamics is yet to be resolved, and if security and counter-terrorist strategies are to assume an appropriately multi-faceted form this is a crucial issue on which much work remains to be done.

16 Gregory Gause, op. cit

17 J. Windsor, 'Promoting Democratisation Can Combat Terrorism', *The Washington Quarterly* 26, 3 (2003): 43–58.

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The relationship between security and democracy promotion in the Middle East is the subject of increasingly fierce debate. One side of the argument has advocated support for democratic change as a means of tempering international terrorism and addressing other security concerns. The other side of the argument has strongly questioned democracy's security-enhancing virtue. This paper argues that both sides of the argument are unduly simplistic and appeals for a more nuanced understanding of the democracy-security relationship.

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