

# The Middle East Quarterly

## *Democracy in the Middle East:* Will U.S. Democratization Policy Work?

Published in the Summer 2006 *Middle East Quarterly*, pp. 3-10.

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After 9-11, the Bush administration concluded that decades of U.S. support for non-democratic leaders in the Middle East led not to stability but rather contributed to terrorism.<sup>1</sup> While U.S. government support for democracy promotion is not new, such sustained attention and allocation of resources marks a new emphasis on democratization.

Because of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, too often critics misconstrue U.S. democratization policy as military in focus. During the past quarter century, over eighty countries have become democracies, yet only in five of them—Grenada, Panama, Serbia, Afghanistan, and Iraq—did U.S. military intervention play a role.<sup>2</sup> These examples and the post-World War II experiences of Germany and Japan demonstrate that democratization can occur through use of force, but it is not the preferred or prevalent method. Washington's primary commitment to Middle East democratization support remains in the realm of coordinated diplomacy and international programs.

Democracy support is a long-term investment, but when coupled with diplomatic commitment, it works. Critics of this policy need only look to Chile, El Salvador, South Korea, Taiwan, Georgia, or Ukraine, countries where U.S. administrations patiently employed democracy policies for seven to ten years before the “overnight” victories of citizens against entrenched regimes. In all of these countries, regional experts counseled that, for various cultural reasons, democracy could not take root, and realists counseled that democracy should not take root.<sup>3</sup>

With the exception of Israel, Middle Eastern states have experienced decades of undemocratic practices with deeply entrenched personalities whose interests are inimical to reform. With the end to the “democratic exception” in U.S. policy goals for the region, the Bush administration has committed Washington to be as supportive of accountable and representative governance in the Middle East as it is elsewhere.

Building on the experiences of Middle Eastern countries that had already begun to open their systems, the Bush administration sought to work at the grassroots level by encouraging U.S. nongovernmental organization (NGO) partnerships with local reformers. Diplomats amplified these efforts by emphasizing to host governments the importance to Washington of democratic change. The strategy has already borne fruit. Regional reformers, such as Saad Eddin Ibrahim of Egypt,<sup>4</sup> who saw little hope in the past decade, now believe that meaningful political

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<sup>1</sup> “[Why Was MEPI Established?](#)” *Middle East: Promoting Democracy*, Council on Foreign Relations, Oct. 10, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> “Country Report 2005: [Panama](#),” *Freedom in the World* (Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, 2005), accessed Apr. 6, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Joshua Muravchik, *Exporting Democracy: Fulfilling America's Destiny* (Washington, D.C.: The American Enterprise Institute Press, 1992), pp. 64-80.

<sup>4</sup> For links to Saad Eddin Ibrahim's articles see the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies' website at <http://www.eicds.org/>.

reforms can take hold. Important—although sometimes only symbolic—steps toward expanded democratic participation have occurred in countries such as Kuwait, Bahrain, and even Saudi Arabia. In reaction, longtime U.S. allies with less than democratic systems such as Egypt and Tunisia have sought to counter the shift in Washington’s priorities on democracy and human rights.

## **Washington’s Rationale**

In the months after 9-11, there was a debate within the administration over democracy and human rights policy. Some senior and mid-level officials saw the attacks as the end of a decade-long period in which America was not threatened and could therefore afford the luxury of not being concerned with the internal practices of other nations. The shock of 9-11, they hoped, would diminish the diplomatically inconvenient issues of human rights and democracy. Others, many of whom had served in the Reagan administration, drew parallels between the 1980s and a post-9-11 world. In the 1980s, they believed, the U.S. success was in part due not only to stating what America stood against—communism—but also in enunciating a counter vision of democracy and freedom. Some in the Reagan administration also had viewed democratization as a weapon with which to roll back the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> In the Philippines in 1986, and Chile two years later, democratization also became a tool to ensure that once autocratic allies did not fall prey to Soviet-backed revolutionaries. Democratization was not the only method of ensuring a U.S. Cold War victory, but it was an important part of a broader strategy.

National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice signaled the beginning of a resolution to the debate just a week after the attacks. “Our values matter to us abroad. We are not going to stop talking about the things that matter to us—human rights, religious freedom and so forth and so on. We’re going to continue to press those things,”<sup>6</sup> she said at a news conference. Secretary of State Colin Powell later added, “We have a vision of a region where respect for the sanctity of the individual, the rule of law, and the politics of participation grow stronger day by day.”<sup>7</sup> Other administration officials also restated the importance of human rights and democracy in U.S. diplomacy in general and to the Middle East in particular.

Bush ended the debate when he placed democracy and human rights in the context of the war on terror in his January 2002 State of the Union Address. While media attention focused upon his formulation of an “Axis of Evil,” more consequential was his statement of the importance of democratization for the region:

America will always stand firm for the nonnegotiable demands of human dignity: the rule of law; limits on the power of the state; respect for women; private property; free speech; equal justice; and religious tolerance. America will take the side of brave men and women who advocate these values around the world, including the Islamic world.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Robert G. Kaufman, *Henry M. Jackson: A Life in Politics* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), pp. 438-9.

<sup>6</sup> Condoleezza Rice, national security adviser, news briefing, Washington, D.C., Sept. 19, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Colin L. Powell, U.S. secretary of state, foreign policy address, The McConnell Center for Political Leadership, University of Louisville, Ky., Nov. 19, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> President George W. Bush, [2002 State of the Union](#) address, Washington, D.C., Jan. 29, 2002.

Such a statement marked the first time a U.S. president talked so prominently about human rights in the Muslim world.

Within the State Department, a group of officials in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs and the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor was already working to implement the president's words more concretely. During 2002, the two bureaus combined resources to spend or commit US\$29 million for programs to advance democracy in the Middle East.<sup>9</sup>

When Bush spoke at West Point in June 2002, he drew clear parallels between the Cold War and the post-9-11 world:

The war on terror will require resolve and patience; it will also require firm moral purpose. In this way our struggle is similar to the Cold War. Now, as then, our enemies are totalitarians, holding a creed of power with no place for human dignity. Now, as then, they seek to impose a joyless conformity, to control every life and all of life. America confronted imperial communism in many different ways—diplomatic, economic, and military. Yet moral clarity was essential to our victory in the Cold War. When leaders like John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan refused to gloss over the brutality of tyrants, they gave hope to prisoners and dissidents and exiles, and rallied free nations to a great cause.<sup>10</sup>

The December 2002 creation of the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) furthered the U.S. democratization agenda. In unveiling the program, Powell explained, “Any approach to the Middle East that ignores its political, economic, and educational underdevelopment will be built upon sand.”<sup>11</sup> MEPI sought to effect change by funding pilot projects, such as an election assistance program in Jordan and a program to monitor Yemeni parliamentary elections. The willingness of governments to allow such funding in their countries signaled a tangible willingness to permit the advance of their democracies. This shifted focus from traditional government-to-government aid programs and, instead, emphasized smaller grants to smaller NGOs. Despite claims by some commentators that the U.S. government is obsessed with electoral—as opposed to liberal—democracy, MEPI's list of grantees reflects an emphasis on civil society, judicial and media reform, and enfranchising women.

The largest portion of the MEPI budget supported political programs to strengthen democratic processes, create or expand public space for critical democratic debates, strengthen the role of free media, and promote the rule of law to ensure government accountability. The State Department tailored these programs to account for both local needs and the art of the possible. For example, it brought student leaders from countries such as Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, and Saudi Arabia to Purdue, Notre Dame, George Washington University, and the University of Delaware<sup>12</sup> and supported parliamentary training in Morocco for recently-elected politicians as that country's political system began to open to a region-wide effort for judicial and legal reform.<sup>13</sup> Because “countries cannot succeed as democracies if more

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<sup>9</sup> “[U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative](#) Fact Sheet,” U.S. Department of State: Office of the Spokesman, Dec. 12, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> President George W. Bush, graduation speech, United States Military Academy, West Point, N.Y., [June 1, 2002](#).

<sup>11</sup> Colin L. Powell, “The U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative: [Building Hope](#) for the Years Ahead,” speech to The Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., Dec. 12, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> “Middle East Students Learn about America in the Mid-West,” [Purdue News](#), July 14, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> “[U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative](#) Program Descriptions for Fiscal 2002,” U.S. Department of State: Office of the Spokesman, July 14, 2003.

than half of their population is denied basic democratic rights,”<sup>14</sup> MEPI also seeks to improve women’s rights in order to increase women’s economic independence and participation in governance.

After initial start-up programs developed largely by MEPI staff, the office faced mid-life problems because of an increasing reliance on U.S. embassy staff and host governments for program recommendations. Many grants awarded during this period were benign. They brought little or no risk to the host government and did not do enough to advance democratization. There was a selection bias toward programs benefiting Arab governments, as opposed to those focusing on the civic sector. This reflected the traditional dilemmas of many diplomats who, on one hand, might agree with the necessity of reform, but on the other, are reluctant to do anything to disrupt their relationships with senior government officials. MEPI has since checked this tendency by deploying its own staff—including many foreign service officers—on long-term assignments to the region in which they can seek out local partners and NGOs independent of the U.S. embassy.

Critics say that MEPI programs are too small and scattered to fulfill U.S. policy goals for the region. But MEPI alone is not meant to be the entirety of policy. Diplomatic follow-up can amplify MEPI’s effectiveness. Some elements of the bureaucracy within the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have been too slow to reflect the new emphasis on democracy and human rights promotion. A consistent message across the U.S. foreign policy apparatus including its embassies overseas will ensure a smoother transition toward democracy.

Any question that a U.S. commitment to democratize the Middle East had waned was put to rest with Bush’s January 2005 inaugural address<sup>15</sup> and his subsequent speeches provided more definition to his approach. Noting problems faced by countries from Slovakia and Georgia to Iraq and Afghanistan, the president stated,

No nation in history has made the transition from tyranny to a free society without setbacks and false starts. What separates those nations that succeed from those that falter is their progress in establishing free institutions. So to help young democracies succeed, we must help them build free institutions to fill the vacuum created by change.<sup>16</sup>

In coming months and years—regardless of whether a Republican or Democrat is in the White House—there will be greater focus upon institutional reforms in those countries which have already begun their transformations. In countries such as Libya, Syria, and Tunisia that lag behind in democratization, U.S. policymakers will emphasize outreach and empowerment of civil society.

Democratization policy continues to evolve. In response to criticism from some Middle Eastern leaders that democratization imposed from the outside could not work,<sup>17</sup> the Bush administration launched the Fund for the Future. The fund is a joint venture between Western and regional governments on one hand and the private sector on the other. Its goal is to support “indigenous reformers to draw upon their ideas and their ideals to nurture grassroots organizations that support the development of democracy” with grants to build civil society, strengthen the rule of law, and ensure greater opportunity for health and education. However, the

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Haass, “Toward Greater Democracy in the Muslim World,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2000, p. 146.

<sup>15</sup> “President Sworn-In to Second Term,” White House news release, [Jan. 20, 2005](#).

<sup>16</sup> President George W. Bush, speech to the International Republican Institute, Washington, D.C., [May 18, 2005](#).

<sup>17</sup> “Mubarak: Democracy in the Arab World Can’t Be Imposed from Outside,” *USA Today*, Mar. 13, 2005.

fund's planned 2005 launch at the Forum for the Future summit in Bahrain failed to produce a formal agreement due to Egyptian demands that only government-sanctioned NGOs be eligible. Such a condition, reflective of the strategy of many regional governments to create a class of government-operated NGOs, would derail promotion of independent civil society.

## The Consistency Debate

Many hurdles remain to democratization. Critics of U.S. policy complain about interference and conspiratorial motives. Some U.S. opponents of democratization say that U.S. pressure actually backfires. Evidence suggests the opposite. Take Egypt: while anti-American rhetoric flows through the streets of Cairo, and Egyptian officials may complain bitterly at outside interference, there is no doubt that Washington's pressure has worked. Egyptian party leaders and other activists say that U.S. pressure helped enable passage of a constitutional amendment to permit multiparty presidential elections. Washington also pushed successfully for domestic monitors to enter polling sites and a broader mandate for judges in election oversight.<sup>18</sup>

Egyptians watch U.S. actions and policy statements closely. When Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice canceled her scheduled visit to Cairo in response to opposition candidate Ayman Nour's January 2005 arrest, his supporters rejoiced.<sup>19</sup> Her stance drew a red line for Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and encouraged others to fight for democratic reform. Rice's subsequent speech at the American University in Cairo outlined democratization goals for Egypt:

The Egyptian government must fulfill the promise it has made to its people—and to the entire world—by giving its citizens the freedom to choose. Egypt's elections, including the parliamentary elections, must meet objective standards that define every free election. Opposition groups must be free to assemble, and to participate, and to speak to the media. Voting should occur without violence or intimidation. And international election monitors and observers must have unrestricted access to do their jobs.<sup>20</sup>

Such talk was unprecedented in a relationship long marked by diplomatic niceties and billions of dollars per year in aid. It was a turning point for many Egyptians who began to feel that the U.S. government was sincere if it would call to task its closest ally in the Arab world.

However, Rice's words highlighted the dilemma of public consistency versus private diplomacy. When public statements and actions requiring those elements of free elections did not follow her words in the following months, there was palpable frustration among political parties and NGOs. They felt that Washington had allowed other interests to take center stage. While back-channel discussions as to the priority and importance of the freedoms of choice outlined by Rice at American University continued, there was no public expression of U.S. anger, so many Egyptians assumed the United States had forgotten its promises. Cynicism is bred when any constituency detects a divergence between rhetoric and reality. This makes imperative greater public diplomacy to explain transparently U.S. policy in the region. For example, for decades USAID's Egypt program was unique in that the host government's approval was required for democracy projects. It was a courtesy historically extended to the Egyptian government because

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<sup>18</sup> "International Republican Institute, [2005 Presidential Election Assessment in Egypt](#), August 15-September 9, 2005," International Republican Institute, Washington, D.C.

<sup>19</sup> Based on discussions with Nour's supporters in Egypt, Jan. 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Condoleezza Rice, secretary of state, speech at the American University in Cairo, Egypt, [June 20, 2005](#).

of Cairo's participation in the Middle East peace process. USAID now no longer seeks Egyptian government approval for its grants. It can now support Egyptian organizations with an explicit focus on democracy without Mubarak's blessing. In spring 2005, it awarded its first million dollars in grants to local Egyptian NGOs under these new procedures.<sup>21</sup>

The new procedures in Egypt also show the importance of the U.S. Congress in the debate. Pressure to bypass the Egyptian government in grant awards occurred after U.S. congressmen questioned conditions on financial assistance to Egypt. Some members called for across-the-board cuts, others demanded more spending on democracy and less on the military, and still others proposed linking payments to specific benchmarks. When different branches of departments and agencies within the U.S. government forward a consistent message, the chances for progress are greatly increased.

## **The Instability Issue**

Even as the U.S. government fine-tunes its policies, many foreign policy commentators and pundits second-guess the wisdom of democracy promotion. Leon T. Hadar, a research fellow at CATO, argued in the wake of the Danish cartoon controversy that "liberal democracy ... is not an export commodity."<sup>22</sup>

Some see the recent election results in Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, and the West Bank and Gaza as a setback for the U.S. administration's agenda of promoting democracy. They argue that holding elections too soon can undercut democratization, empower illiberal forces, and promote instability. In Iraq, ironically, many commentators argue that Washington did not push elections fast enough.<sup>23</sup>

Washington did not push elections in Egypt, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Authority. The polls had long since been scheduled. What the Bush administration did was insist that the elections be fair. The elections did empower Islamists. But many polls suggest that a portion of the Islamist vote in Egypt and the Palestinian Authority was more a sign of frustration with the status quo and anger at corruption than an endorsement of Islamism. Both the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hamas in the West Bank and Gaza juxtaposed an aura of cleanliness against the established elites' corruption. One poll showed that the attitude of the Palestine Liberation Organization and Hamas toward Israel was only the fifth-most important issue among Palestinian voters as they headed to the polls. Reform of corrupt governing institutions, improved internal security, improved economic conditions, and the promotion of democracy ranked higher.<sup>24</sup>

U.S. policymakers are not pleased with the rise of groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, but President Bush's willingness to recognize the election results should silence skeptics of U.S. commitment to democratic reform. After the Hamas victory, regional critics would have difficulty maintaining the theory that democracy promotion is meant to install puppet regimes. That said, as with the case of Hamas, accepting the result of a democratic election does not signal U.S. endorsement of the resulting regime. Winning elections does not alone create

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<sup>21</sup> Tamara Cofman Wittes, "The [2005 Egyptian Elections](#): How Free? How Important?" The Brookings Institution, Saban Center Middle East Memo no. 8, Aug. 24, 2005.

<sup>22</sup> *The Australian*, Feb. 9, 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Larry Diamond, *Squandered Victory: The American Occupation and the Bungled Effort to Bring Democracy to Iraq* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2005), p. 304.

<sup>24</sup> "Birzeit University and Development Studies Programme: Palestinian Legislative Council Elections Poll Results, [no. 20](#)," International Republican Institute, Jan. 25, 2006.

democrats. Even with long established democracies, U.S. relations ebb and flow depending on who is elected.

Democracy advocates would argue that rather than back down from democracy promotion, U.S. policy must focus more on securing a level playing field to enable moderate political leaders to emerge. In Egypt, civil opposition parties performed poorly in recent parliamentary elections precisely because the government used quarter-century old emergency laws to restrict their ability to operate and communicate to voters. While autocrats silence liberals, Islamists maintain a platform through the mosques. Washington should not use fear of Islamist forces to justify regime efforts to limit genuine political competition. Washington should react to Islamist gains in Egypt with renewed effort to create a legal and institutional framework to allow equal competition for liberal forces. Elections will occur in Morocco, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman in late 2006 and 2007 regardless of U.S. actions. Greater U.S. engagement, though, could mitigate the outcome.

## Conclusion

Despite the setbacks and adjustments, there is cause for optimism about the ability of democracy to take root in the Middle East. There were many changes underway in the region even before 9-11. The region is changing fast and often for the better. Women now have the right to vote in Kuwait. Observers can monitor multiparty elections in Egypt. Popular protests in Lebanon led to the end of Syrian occupation. The first elected parliament in more than three decades took office in Afghanistan.

Five years ago, reform in the region was limited to monarchies in the region such as Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Morocco.<sup>25</sup> Liberals across the Middle East can increasingly advocate for additional democratic practices. Today, there are only a handful of truly repressive countries. Here, it is important for U.S. policy to keep fledgling political opposition from being silenced. President Bush did not create reformers, but his policies have, on one hand, encouraged them and, on the other hand, prevented autocrats from suffocating them. There is no longer a taboo of speaking about democratic reform in the Middle East. After seven years of U.S. democratization efforts, it will be difficult to again allow a “democratic exception” for the region.

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<sup>25</sup> For an interesting discussion of the correlation between moderation and monarchy in the Middle East, see Owen H. Kirby, “[Want Democracy? Get a King](#),” *Middle East Quarterly*, Dec. 2000, pp. 3-12.