

# The Arab Democratic Moderates and U.S. Policy

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As we have seen, the challenges facing the Arab world—and the United States in the Arab world—are not only external, however vexing those dilemmas may be. There are deep, barely concealed, fractures within and among Arab countries and societies. Cynicism about the intentions of any and all political authorities, including the United States and the regimes it supports, is widespread and growing. Although the democracy promotion efforts of both the Clinton and Bush Administrations were eagerly embraced in many parts of the world, U.S. efforts at democracy promotion in the Middle East in the two decades after the end of the Cold War had largely perverse effects. There, and despite very substantial enthusiasm among wide segments of the intellectual and political elite, regimes under pressure from the U.S. adopted the institutional facades of democratic politics—constitutionalism, parliaments, even elections—without endorsing their purposes: enhanced transparency, accountability and equity. Many of these regimes are widely unpopular with their own citizenry, and the frequent, and frequently disingenuous, deployment of the language of human rights, rule of law and democracy by those regimes has only exacerbated the resentment of populations who do not trust their governments.

The Tunisian government has perfected this false piety, but it is hardly unique. Morocco's King Hassan II argued that democracy was a gift from him to his subjects—"democracy is grant-

ed in Morocco because I am the first to demand it"—and complained that his munificence was not adequately appreciated: "Shouldn't my granting of democracy to my people be considered a noble deed?" Algeria's rulers justified the military intervention that canceled parliamentary elections in 1992 by saying that "we must stop the electoral process in order to safeguard the democratization process."

The willingness, even eagerness, with which Western powers have colluded with these and other regimes in the Arab world to take the appearance of democracy for its reality has profoundly handicapped local efforts to foster genuine democratization. As a result, there has been no peaceful regime change in the region, and the violent regime change in Iraq did not produce *bona fide* democracy. The vast numbers of citizens who feel themselves disenfranchised in political systems that are little more than cynical ploys have increasingly turned to political movements like Hezbollah and Hamas, which reject not only the incumbent rulers, but the very systems themselves.

For the United States, and thanks to its association with the promotion of these kinds of institutions, this poses a very serious quandary. The demands of U.S. interests in stability, in preventing terrorism, securing access to oil and guaranteeing Israel militate against encouraging the raucous political competition and policy debate of genuine democracy. Yet the American embrace of the autocrats of the

region is interpreted as a profoundly insulting betrayal by our erstwhile democratic allies: see, for a recent example, the deep dismay of the Libyan democratic opposition with the apparently cynical U.S. change of heart about Qaddafi's regime in Libya. Moreover, the American boycott of governments produced by democratic elections that we ourselves promoted— Hamas's electoral victory being a case in point—has further undermined confidence in the U.S. commitment to democracy. Because American policy appears to be hypocritical, it is also, as a result, largely ineffectual.

This essay outlines some of the reasons for, and mechanisms of, the "hijacking" of democracy by disingenuous regimes, examines popular reactions, and suggests some of the policy implications for the U.S.

### **Why are the regimes resistant to democratic change?**

Obviously, the simple answer is that the incumbent rulers are well aware that they will likely be voted out of office in free and fair elections. There are two elements to this anxiety, neither of which is entirely trivial. On the first and perhaps most elemental level, there is very little for retired politicians to do in the Arab world. Unlike the U.S. or Europe, where the private sector is robust and there are ample and interesting opportunities for erstwhile policymakers to make a living and exercise influence, most of the modern economic activity of the region is concentrated in a relatively few sectors—oil, telecoms, real estate, construction, etc.—that are already deeply allied with, and reliant on, government connections. The distinctions between the Privy Purse and the public treasury are murky at best—think of Morocco or the Gulf monarchies, where both business and government are family affairs and "privatization" has usually meant little more than a change of the sign on the door. In a region where economic success requires intimate connections with the ruler—where, in other words, wealth grows from power—there is little incentive to leave government.

Perhaps more importantly, these governments know that they are deeply unpopular. For decades they have neglected the welfare of their citizens—the Arab Human Development Reports of 2002-2005 represented but one of the many very sophisticated internal indictments of the performance of regimes that grew corrupt and complacent during decades in power. Population growth rates remain high and social services have failed to keep pace. In some countries, the literacy rate has actually declined, and health provision, especially for the poor, is dreadful. In much of the Arab world, governments have little or no capacity to regulate their economies outside the sectors that are closely tied to the government itself: It is estimated that half of the Egyptian economy and perhaps as much as three quarters of Algeria's is comprised of the black market. Little wonder that shadowy "non-state actors" find fertile ground for political support and ample opportunity for economic activity.

In this kind of context, open political competition is unlikely to be an orderly, decorous affair. Decades of resentment, combined with weak and decaying institutions, are a recipe for civil strife. Even the most well-intentioned democratic ruler—and there are very few in this region—would be loathe to unleash a process as likely to bring down the state as to produce victory for loyal and well-established political parties.

### **If they are so resistant, why have the governments nonetheless adopted the façade of democracy?**

Virtually since independence following World War II, the governments of the Arab world have relied unusually heavily on external sources of revenue. Foreign development assistance and military aid from both outside the region—from former imperial countries in Europe, the USSR, the United States—and within the region, from the major oil producers, has underwritten substantial parts of government budgets. At the same time, and partly as a result, the capacity to collect taxes domesti-

cally remained weak. Since taxation and representation are as intimately linked today as they were on the eve of the American Revolution, the governments that rely on external revenues are as likely to feel—and to be—accountable to their external patrons as to their own citizens.

This explains the very high priority that the regimes of the Arab world give to foreign and regional policy and it contributes to the particular character of political competition in the region. During the Cold War, the regimes played the Soviets and the Americans off against each other, and routinely cited the specter of communist subversion to elicit and sustain American aid. In the waning days of the Cold War and certainly since the war in Afghanistan of the 1980s, the Gulf oil producers, particularly Saudi Arabia, and their conservative brand of Islamic politics have played the “balancing” function once played by Soviet communism in relations with the U.S. Just as adopting the façade of Islamist piety seems to satisfy the oil producers and keep their aid flowing, so too adopting the appearance of democratic politics has seemed to mollify U.S. policymakers. In neither case is there a great deal of genuine ideological enthusiasm.

### **Why then has Islamist politics seemed to take stronger root than democracy in the popular imagination?**

Islam is, of course, familiar to the vast majority of Arabs who are Muslim, and its idiom of social justice and its stipulations about the responsibilities of rulers are clear and well-known in the region. By contrast, democracy is predicated on an exotic and complicated system of procedural rules with no clear substantive outcome and that, confusingly, sometimes seems to support the rulers and sometimes constrains them. Some of the appeal of Islam over democracy, in other words, is simply a matter of familiarity.

That said, it is also true that the regional advocates of Islamist politics are much more steadfast in pursuit of their project than the internation-

al promoters of democracy. In spite of decades of rhetoric, the United States and its Western allies have been relatively restrained in their efforts to foster democratic institutions. Indeed, both the Clinton and Bush Administrations behaved as if they believed that democracy is the default condition of humankind, requiring only the removal of tyranny—whether Soviet or Iraqi—to flourish. In fact, of course, democracy is built, and it flourishes only where there is a strong market, robust and appropriate education, and varied and durable civic institutions. Yet the democracy promotion agenda has not typically included sustained efforts to foster small business, support literacy programs, or encourage scouting, athletics, business improvement districts, PTAs or any of the myriad other “schools for democracy” that Americans typically enjoy in civil society.

The supporters of Islamist politics, by contrast, have left little to chance. In their competitions with the Libyans in the 1970s and with the Iranians after the revolution, the Saudis, for example, have been both generous and targeted in their aid provision. Support of government budgets has been tied to access to popular venues and—as we now know—Saudi funding has been important in building mosques, underwriting schools, encouraging women’s auxiliaries and Qur’anic study groups, and supporting charities like clinics and orphanages throughout the Muslim world.

### **Where are the Arab moderates now? Where is there evidence of political reform, institution building and transparency in the Arab world?**

To answer these questions we need to acknowledge that in this environment, neither the “democrats” nor the “Islamists” can be counted as “moderates.” For better or worse, these positions have been constructed as competing ideologies and, like their Islamist competitors, the democracy enthusiasts have vastly overstated their case. The watchword of the Islamists—“Islam is the solution”—is widely

mocked by the cosmopolitan intelligentsia in the region but, in fact, democracy has been marketed with the same kind of facile sloganeering; as an astute Arab commentator put it, democracy is “endowed with a virtually talismanic quality, as a protean force capable, when meaningfully put into practice, of solving all outstanding problems.”

As a result, many of the intellectuals and policy makers who might be counted as “moderate” in the Arab world today have given up on politics; they long not for democracy (and still less for Islam in government) but for competence. There is widespread exhaustion with ideological politics and an increasing focus on modest promises, successfully delivered. From this vantage point, few would argue that there are serious signs of political reform, institution-building and transparency at the national political level anywhere in the region.

The picture looks a little better when the focus is on sub-national arenas—local governments or social service sectors or particular economic initiatives. Some such sectors—education in Jordan, scientific research in Saudi Arabia, export agriculture in Egypt, for example—seem to be making genuine and perhaps unexpected strides, and in doing so, they are contributing obliquely to more robust government and civic society institutions.

Also cause for cautious optimism: many of the regimes of the region that thrived on extravagance, whether ideological or financial, in the recent past are finding that this is a time for parsimony and pragmatism—and this will be a very welcome development. Whether the impact of the global financial crisis in the Gulf obliges the business community there to reconsider its many irresponsible and improvident investments or a more restrained U.S. policy elsewhere in the region encourages more sober government, the era of undeliverable promises should be brought to a close.

### **One more question: How important is a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict to the cause of Arab moderates?**

The Arab-Israeli conflict is corrosive. It demoralizes and embarrasses governments and citizens alike across the region and deflects attention from pressing issues at home—and everyone in the region knows it. Their inability even to address, much less end, the recent conflict in Gaza was deeply frustrating, indeed humiliating, to the Arab governments of the region. Most of these governments would be happy to move on and attend to the pressing issues elsewhere in the region, not to say at home, were it not for a sense of moral and political obligation to the Palestinians—a commitment not unlike the American responsibility to Israel.

Indeed, if the relationship between the Arab countries and the Palestinians were understood as symmetrical to that of the United States and Israel, it might permit a more collaborative approach to resolving the problem. Just as U.S. patronage of Israel is a permanent feature of American policy, so too, the Arab world sees itself as having an enduring responsibility for the Palestinians. The inability of the governments of the Arab world to discharge that responsibility effectively contributes to the humiliation and frustration that sustains symbolic politics, feeds popular unrest, and eviscerates efforts at genuine development. While some of that powerlessness may well be self-inflicted, there is little to be gained in letting everyone simmer in these toxic juices.

### **Policy approaches**

This analysis suggests several principles that should guide U.S. policy in the region.

1. Silence is golden. The distractions occasioned by the global financial crisis, the war in Iraq, the confrontation with Iran, and the wars in Central Asia should be

seized as an opportunity to ratchet down the rhetoric. The U.S. should resist committing itself to producing democracy, defeating terror, supporting moderates, liberating the oppressed, ending tyranny, or any other high-minded and ultimately impossible tasks. These are all desirable aims but they are equally undesirable promises. Our commitment to democracy, including human rights and the rule of law, should be unwavering as we observe and practice it ourselves—the recent presidential election, including the generous concession of the defeated candidate and the gracious departure of the outgoing president, represent as good a tool of democracy promotion as has been invented—but we should not make rash promises about its export, nor use it to justify policies we undertake for other reasons.

2. Small is beautiful. Neither economic nor political reform efforts on the part of the U.S. should be primarily focused on national level initiatives. Small businesses, town councils, village clinics, local sports clubs, community school districts—these are where nearly everyone in the world who is community-minded and public spirited learned why that outlook is important and how to be effective. If U.S. non-military foreign aid is targeted at the local level, it is less likely to threaten or destabilize the national governments on whom we continue to rely in the region; and it is more likely to be effective both in fostering prosperity and in siphoning support from the Islamists. If it is true, as it seems to be, that as long as the war in Iraq, the crisis with Iran and the conflict in South Asia continue, the United States has no option but to work with autocratic rulers

in the Arab world, it can do so in such a way as to contribute productively to creating accountability and prosperity at the grassroots.

3. 'Peace' is win-win. A peace—or perhaps better, an end to belligerence, since we do not want to over-promise—between the Palestinians and Israelis is not (only) a good in itself, it is a necessary step to restoring 'normalcy' to a region that had been degraded by war and frustration for decades. The Israelis and Palestinians both need to give up dreams of a definitive victory in favor of arrangements which ensure long-term security and stability for both. To do this, and to ensure that it is durable, the Arab world needs to be brought into the negotiations as the guarantor of the Palestinians, much as the U.S. is the sponsor of Israel. This may require surrendering some of the "honest broker" role the U.S. has assumed since the 1970s to an institution—the European Union, the United Nations, a mechanism yet to be devised—that is less implicated in the conflict. In the long run, however, it is more important that the conflict be resolved than that the U.S. get all the credit.

If the United States were to pursue its policies quietly, modestly and without much of the high drama that has characterized its approach to the Arab world over the last several decades, the enormous regard in which American accomplishments—our political democracy, our civic virtues and personal freedoms, our technological inventiveness and our economic prosperity—are held virtually everywhere in the region would quickly reappear. And that would be enormously beneficial to the United States, and to the region.

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