

America, Democracy, and the Arab World: The Balance Sheet

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Ayman Nour, the leader of a small liberal opposition party in Egypt who was recently released from prison, said during an interview in April 2009 that he no longer hoped for U.S. support for democracy in his country: "All we hope for [from the Obama administration] is that it will not have a negative effect. We say to the Americans and to the West: 'Please, we don't want support for democracy, but we don't want support for oppression either.' Oppression creates extremism. Americans don't understand that equation and they always pay the price for it, but we pay the price twice over." Nour's somewhat contradictory remarks reflect a degree of fatigue, certainly understandable in a man of fragile health who spent the last three years in prison. But he is far from the only one struggling with whether and how the United States should support the expansion of democracy in the Middle East after the demise of the Bush administration's freedom agenda.

The election of Barack Obama as President of the United States brought a wave of good feeling about the United States and American democracy to the Middle East. The rise to power in the United States of a young man with African American roots, Muslim family ties, and modest economic means frankly amazed many Arabs. Arabs would like to see changes not only from Bush era policies but from traditional pre-2001 U.S. policies in the Middle East as well, although many are skeptical about this. But there is still a curiosity about Obama and a

willingness to hear what he has to say, at least at this early stage of his presidency.

As Arabs listen to Obama, they will be interested initially in divining how he will handle the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Iranian strategic threat. Beyond that, however, they will also wonder whether he will attempt to connect not only to Arab governments but to the peoples of the Middle East by showing support for their demands for employment, education, human rights, and political freedom.

Legacy of the Bush Freedom Agenda

President George W. Bush provoked a great deal of interest initially with his 2003 admission that: "Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe" and announcing a "forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East." For a while (especially from 2003-2005), civil society and opposition forces in many Arab countries appeared to be emboldened, and some Arab governments responded with a series of political, economic, and social reforms. But the invasion of Iraq, subsequent sectarian violence, and human rights abuses associated with U.S. counterterrorism efforts caused widespread Arab cynicism about U.S. intentions in the region, which Arab authoritarian governments encouraged. Moreover, from 2006 onward the Bush administration scaled back its pro-democracy efforts in light of increasingly difficult conditions in the region,

including the election of Hamas in Palestine and spiraling sectarian violence in Iraq.

In order to formulate a policy that makes sense in the current context, it is important to separate the wheat from the chaff in looking at the Bush freedom agenda. Bush's *ex post facto* justification of the Iraq invasion as central to democracy promotion, as well as the inconsistent ways in which the freedom agenda was pursued, dogged the policy and diminished its results. But however controversial the legacy of the Bush freedom agenda, there are several myths about it that should be dispelled:

- the Bush freedom agenda turned Arabs against democracy;
- it accomplished nothing;
- it prevented cooperation with Arab allies on strategic issues;
- it focused excessively on elections rather than on building democratic institutions.

First, polling data from the Arab Barometer Project show that support for democracy is as high or higher in Arab countries as it is in other parts of the world, even among those who are strongly critical of U.S. policies. The Barometer's 2006 poll in Jordan, Palestine, Algeria, Morocco, and Kuwait showed that three-quarters of respondents agreed with the statement: "Democracy may have its problems, but it is better than any other form of government." Second, although the Bush administration pursued the freedom agenda only briefly and inconsistently, there were some positive results. Partly as a result of U.S. efforts, for example, media and public discourse in the Arab world are now markedly freer than they were before 2002. Civil society organizations, while still restricted, have increased greatly in number and enjoy a higher status in society in many countries than they once did. Islamist and secular opposition activists have begun a productive dialogue in several countries.

The Bush freedom agenda, while annoying to many Arab allies, never seriously endangered cooperation with them on strategic issues. In

Egypt, for example, President Mubarak provided quiet logistical support for the 2003 invasion of Iraq and cooperated with the United States on the 2005 unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, at the very time during which there was significant tension between Washington and Cairo on democracy issues. Two factors motivated continued cooperation by Arab allies. First, the Bush administration promoted gradual democratization, not regime change, in friendly countries and so Arab allies knew they were not immediately threatened. Second, Arab allies cooperate with the United States—or do not—based on their own strategic interests, not as a favor to Washington.

The elections issue has haunted discussions of democracy promotion since the Hamas upset in the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections. The Bush administration made the decision, perhaps unwisely, to support President Mahmoud Abbas's desire to hold long-postponed legislative elections in January 2006 and to accept both Abbas's plea that Hamas must be enfranchised and his assurance that Fatah would win a majority. The victory by a terrorist organization (unexpected even by Hamas) threw the region—and U.S. policy on Israeli/Palestinian issues—into turmoil. It also created the impression that democracy promotion under Bush was all about pushing for free elections without building the institutions of democracy.

An examination of democracy promotion programs by USAID and the Department of State's Middle East Partnership Initiative during the Bush years, however, tells another story. There were extensive programs in education, judicial reform, journalist training, economic reform, etc., alongside election-related programs such as training of election monitors, campaign workers, and potential candidates (particularly women). It was not that the United States forced Arab countries to hold elections or concentrated all pro-democracy efforts on elections, but rather that the Bush administration began to use assistance (and in some cases, pressure) to promote freer and fairer elections. More and more Arab countries are holding

elections on a regular or semi-regular basis; nearly all Arab countries (excepting Libya and Somalia) hold elections of some kind, and most now have elected parliaments.

Current Choices

Significant Arab popular sentiment in favor of democracy, growing freedom of expression, and increasingly frequent elections mean that the choices facing the United States regarding democracy promotion are a bit different than they might appear at first glance. It is not so much a question of the United States forcing American-style democracy onto an unwilling and unprepared Arab world as it is the United States deciding how it should handle the many challenges that an evolving political scene in Arab countries will present.

There are both continuities and changes in Arab politics that will challenge the United States. The main features of politics in most Arab countries have not changed much in decades:

- powerful executive branch officials (whether monarchs or presidents) who are not accountable to an electorate;
- weak legislative branch institutions, in which an elected lower house enjoys little power and is often balanced by an appointed upper house;
- judiciaries that are not fully independent;
- regimes that carry out cosmetic reforms in order to absorb public demands but avoid any power sharing;
- opposition movements with little ability to exert influence on the government;
- Islamist opposition groups (active in social welfare delivery and possessing extensive grassroots networks through mosques) that generally are more able to mobilize supporters than are secular opposition groups.

At the same time, there are changes in the Arab political landscape that merit attention:

- political debate has become more open, with the explosion of media outlets and the lifting of many taboos (such as criticizing leaders);
- information on human rights abuses circulates widely via new media, human rights organizations enjoy a higher societal status, and several countries now have semi-official human rights commissions;
- democratic political systems have gained widespread acceptance as an ideal, including among Islamists and leftists;
- liberal political ideas are enjoying a small but discernable renaissance among educated youth and political elites;
- most countries are holding elections, many have electoral commissions, and some have made important strides in election procedures.

Taken together, these constants and changes present a picture of a region where society is on the move but ruling elites are making minimal concessions so far. As the United States must work with these ruling elites on several critical questions—preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, stabilizing Iraq, making peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors—can the United States at the same time promote the shift, however gradual, of political power away from tiny elites and toward the broader electorate?

Connecting the Freedoms

President Obama has cited freedom from want and freedom from fear (two of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "four freedoms," which also included freedom of expression and freedom of religion) as priorities in discussing how to deal with democracy promotion abroad. Economic development and conflict resolution, necessary to secure those freedoms, are critical in the Middle East and the United States should

support them energetically. What has been missing from the evolving policy of the Obama administration so far is how they are connected to other freedoms (of expression, religion, association, *inter alia*) and to the right of citizens to choose their government.

In the Middle Eastern context, freedom from want also means improved education in order to qualify young people for jobs in the global economy. While Arab governments have invested in building schools, the quality of instruction remains poor in many cases. Arab Human Development reports by the UN Development Program have identified the failure to encourage research and critical thinking as key deficits. The United States (whether through U.S. government assistance to poor countries or assistance by American educational institutions contracted by wealthy Arab countries) is already playing a large role in developing education in the region. This should continue to be a priority in U.S. assistance but is a long-term effort that cannot substitute for engagement on current human rights and democracy issues.

Among the lessons learned from decades of U.S. development assistance is that it is difficult for real economic development to take place under repressive or predatory governments. (The UNDP reports cited above reached the same conclusion, citing a “freedom deficit” as impeding all forms of human development in the Arab countries). The Millennium Challenge Act of 2003 recognized this principle and made significant amounts of economic assistance available to governments that met certain standards of good governance and investment in their citizens. Whatever the outcome of discussions on the future of U.S. assistance (whether through the Millennium Challenge Corporation, the Middle East Partnership Initiative, or the U.S. Agency for International Development), it will be important to preserve this principle in some way. Government that is reasonably efficient, clean, and accountable to citizens should continue to be an important goal of U.S. economic assistance.

Is it possible for Arab countries to have good governance without democratization? There are some Arab rulers—King Abdullah of Jordan, for example, and King Muhammad of Morocco—who show sincere interest in improving the quality of governance in their countries and the welfare of their subjects. While the United States should encourage such moves (and has done so through the MCC and other forms of assistance), it should not confuse them with democratization. As in other Arab countries, the ruler remains powerful and unaccountable to an electorate, and elected parliaments remain weak. In both countries, political opposition movements call for establishing a constitutional monarchy and transferring more powers to the elected parliament. It remains to be seen whether such calls will strengthen with time.

Should the United States promote the building of democratic institutions as a precursor to encouraging open political competition? Democracy scholar Thomas Carothers speaks of a “sequencing fallacy,” pointing out that history shows few cases in which authoritarian rulers willingly allowed the creation and empowerment of institutions that would curb their power. Normally such rulers only agree to such reforms when compelled by political competitors. Thus institution building and the growth of political competition generally proceed together in untidy ways that vary from country to country.

Finding a Policy Goal between Regime Change and Authoritarian Consolidation

If the United States pushes aggressively for democratization in any Arab country, particularly a country without reasonably well-developed political forces and institutions, it runs several risks. First, it will almost certainly lose any cooperation from the existing government. Second, without reasonably capable institutions the country might descend into chaos or violence. Third, if political forces are immature, extremists (probably Islamists) could sweep aside other groups and take power. Because

the United States enjoys close relations with many Arab governments, such extremists are likely to be hostile to U.S. interests.

There is no such thing as promoting democracy while avoiding all risk, but the United States can diminish the risk of such infelicitous outcomes:

- The United States can avoid alienating current governments by making clear that its strategy is not one of regime change or revolution but rather of supporting gradual but real changes to meet legitimate demands for improved human, civil, and political rights.
- The United States can promote the growth of institutions that support accountability such as a free press and independent judiciary, as well as those that allow the expansion of political competition, such as independent electoral commissions.
- The United States can support a gradual opening of the political space in Arab countries that allows the emergence and enfranchisement of various political groups. The gradual enfranchisement of Islamists in many countries (Arab countries such as Morocco, Bahrain, Yemen, and Jordan as well as Turkey) has led to more moderate and pragmatic positions on many issues.

While the United States should in general promote gradual reform and democratization, it should avoid the trap of rewarding authoritarian regimes for carrying out cosmetic reforms with no real impact or a negative net impact. Arab governments have become expert in carrying out reforms that appear to accommodate some indigenous or foreign demands while actually consolidating the basis of authoritarian rule and foreclosing possibilities of greater competition. Egypt's 2007 constitutional amendments, which accorded the parliament some marginal powers but also removed judicial supervision of elections, are an excellent case in point.

The United States should not promote democracy in a way that backfires or creates unrealistic hopes and then abandons them. But, to return to the remarks by Ayman Nour, it also should not "support oppression." In the end, it is not possible for the United States, with its major presence in the Middle East, to be neutral on this question. If the United States does not stand in favor of democracy and human rights—in a wise, prudent, patient, but serious way—then peoples and governments in the region automatically will see it as standing in favor of the persistence of authoritarian rule. As President Obama suggested in his inaugural remarks, it is a question of deciding on which side of history we stand.
