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**Is Civil Society
the Answer?**

Amy Hawthorne



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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
1779 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: 202-483-7600
Fax: 202-483-1840
www.ceip.org

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About the Author

Amy Hawthorne is an associate in the Democracy and Rule of Law Project at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. She is a specialist on Middle East politics and on democracy promotion, and is the editor of the Endowment's *Arab Reform Bulletin* (www.ceip.org/ArabReform).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Iraq is obviously the overwhelming focus of the Bush administration's policy of attempting to transform the Middle East into a zone of liberal democracies. The United States is also trying to formulate a second, more gradual track of democracy promotion for the authoritarian and semiauthoritarian Arab states that make up the rest of the region. Strengthening civil society is often proposed as a key element of a U.S. strategy for this second track of Middle Eastern democracy promotion.

Strengthening civil society has become a standard part of the U.S. democracy-promotion tool kit worldwide. The existence of "vibrant" civil societies is considered essential to democracy and to democratization. In the Arab world, civil society organizations, particularly nongovernmental organizations, have proliferated in the past decade. Civil society enthusiasts have interpreted this growth as a sign of Arab citizens' democratic empowerment. Some U.S. policy makers and other observers of Middle Eastern politics further assume that much of civil society is populated by latent pro-American forces that could, with outside support, become sources of benign democratic change "from below." For all these reasons, they recommend that the United States and other donors provide civil society groups with large amounts of funding, training, and technical assistance.

Despite civil society's apparent appeal, the United States should proceed cautiously. The reality is that Arab civil society on the whole has not been a force for democratization. Civil society, as the zone of voluntary associative life beyond family ties but separate from the state and the market, fulfills a variety of functions. Like elsewhere, the zone of civil society in Arab countries *can* be a source of democratic change, but it is not *inherently* one. The bulk of Arab civil society is made up of organizations, associations, and movements that support the status quo, advocate conservative reforms, or are simply apolitical.

Although it is not widely known, the United States has been assisting Arab civil society groups for more than a decade, as part of low-level democracy-promotion efforts that began during the George H. W. Bush administration. Because the impact of this aid has been disappointing, the experience offers valuable lessons for improving future civil society assistance.

Along with other donor countries, the United States should make assistance to civil society a component of new efforts to promote democratic change in the Middle East. But it should do so with a clear understanding of the nature of civil society in Arab countries, of the most effective ways to help civil society organizations to contribute to democratic change, and of the limits of U.S. influence in this zone.

INTRODUCTION: THE APPEAL OF CIVIL SOCIETY

ALTHOUGH IRAQ IS CURRENTLY THE OVERWHELMING FOCUS of the Bush administration's policy of attempting to transform the Middle East into a zone of pro-American liberal democracies, Washington is formulating a second, longer-term democracy-promotion track for the other countries of the region. On November 6, 2003, President George W. Bush delivered a major speech announcing this track. He declared that because "sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe," the United States had adopted a "new policy, a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East"—to be pursued in countries including those with governments friendly to the United States.¹

Bush's speech broke new ground because it was the first time that a U.S. president had publicly criticized some of America's Arab allies for their authoritarian ways and had mentioned democratization so explicitly as a leading objective of U.S. Middle East policy. The real test of a genuine shift in U.S. policy, however, will be whether the administration can translate Bush's lofty rhetoric into effective policies to support genuine democratic change.

This is an exceedingly difficult undertaking. For one thing, in sharp contrast to Washington's last high-profile, regionwide democracy-promotion initiative—to consolidate the new democracies of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union after the collapse of state socialist and Communist rule there—the United States will pursue this second track of Middle East democracy promotion in countries that are not yet undergoing a transition away from authoritarian rule. Despite halting steps toward political reform in some Arab countries, no genuine democratization process has unfolded. As several decades of experience in global democracy promotion have shown, outside assistance has the greatest impact where indigenous momentum for democratic change is evident.

Other obstacles to robust U.S. engagement with Middle East democracy are the United States's lack of credibility as a promoter of democracy in the region and widespread anti-Americanism. The fallout from the attacks of September 11, 2001, resentment over perceived American indifference to Palestinian suffering, and the unpopularity of the United States-led occupation of Iraq are strengthening these long-running currents in the Arab body politic. Further complicating the picture are the United States's continuing reluctance to antagonize friendly Arab governments by pressing them on democracy, and the related concern that calling for rapid political openings will empower forces hostile to the United States. The Bush administration's grand rhetoric on Middle East democracy notwithstanding, in practical terms U.S. officials appear hesitant to rock the boat in friendly Arab states.

All these factors have contributed to the idea of making aid for Arab civil society a leading element of a new U.S. democracy-promotion strategy for countries beyond Iraq. (Civil society

also appeals to many European officials who are beginning to consider developing a more vigorous democracy-promotion policy for the Middle East.) Defining civil society and its role as a prodemocratic force is a matter of extensive scholarly debate. Reduced to its elemental meaning, “civil society” refers to the zone of voluntary associative life beyond family and clan affiliations but separate from the state and the market. Nonprofit organizations, religious organizations, labor unions, business associations, interest and advocacy groups, societies, clubs, and research institutions, as well as more informal political, social, and religious movements, are all part of civil society.²

Under the right conditions, civil society can contribute to the democratization of authoritarian regimes and can help to sustain a democratic system once it is established.³ In the Philippines, Eastern European countries, South Africa, Serbia, and most recently Georgia, for example, citizens have used civil society organizations to carve out independent political space, to learn about democracy, to articulate a democratic alternative to the status quo, to spread this idea within society, and to mobilize millions of their fellow citizens against repressive regimes.

In democracies, civil society organizations provide forums for citizens to pursue shared interests—political, social, or spiritual—freely, collectively, and peacefully. Through involvement in civil society, citizens learn about fundamental democratic values of participation and collective action, and they disseminate these values within their communities. Civil society movements that represent citizen interests can shape both government policy and social attitudes. By constituting a sphere of citizen activity beyond the direct control of government, civil society can form a counterweight to state power.

Because the idea of civil society is closely associated in many Westerners’ minds with “people power” movements to push out dictators and with the success of Western democracy, programs to “strengthen” civil society have become a standard part of the U.S. and European democracy-promotion tool kit around the world. Civil society seems particularly appealing as the solution to the challenge of promoting democracy in the Arab world. Arab nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have grown in number and prominence in recent years. This proliferation is often interpreted as a sign of burgeoning independent civic activity—and perhaps as the source of peaceful democratic change, akin to the prodemocracy movements that emerged in Eastern Europe in the 1980s.

At the same time, there is an assumption that the zone of civil society is safely apolitical—that it is separate from the political sphere dominated by anti-American sentiment and divisive struggles. Perhaps civil society organizations will be more receptive to U.S. support than political forces, and such support will not bolster anti-American groups, the thinking goes. Perhaps by aiding civil society the United States can build bridges to the “silent majority” of Arab publics, convincing them that the United States is on their side. Finally, focusing on NGOs seems like a good way to support a gradual, citizen-generated transformation of politics in the region, thus avoiding the risk of calling for the immediate democratization of the political sphere, and sparing the United States the discomfort of applying heavy pressure on Arab regimes.

For all these reasons, strengthening civil society is frequently offered as the answer to the questions now pervasive in Washington, “How can the Arab world democratize, and what should the United States do to help democracy there?”

The United States, along with European countries, *should* make assistance for civil society groups part of any new strategy to encourage democratic change in the Middle East. But these countries should do so with some caution, recognizing that civil society is not the magic missing piece of the

Arab democracy puzzle. Civil society in the Middle East, like elsewhere, *could be* a democratizing force but is not *inherently* one. Civil society organizations are not necessarily easier for outsiders to assist than other parts of the Arab political landscape. Those devising and implementing new initiatives for Middle East democracy promotion must develop a better understanding of the nature of Arab civil society, the record of past U.S. assistance to civil society, and the limitations of outside assistance—particularly from the United States—in altering deeply rooted political realities.

ARAB CIVIL SOCIETY: THE LAY OF THE LAND

Before considering civil society's role as a force for Arab democratization, it is important to understand its history, its constituent parts, and the forms it takes throughout the region.

Generally speaking, there have been four main phases of civil society development in the Arab world. Before the European penetration of the region in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, civil society consisted mainly of community-based self-help groups, guilds, and religiously oriented charitable and educational institutions, these last funded by Islamic endowments known as *waqfs* (plural, *awqaf*). A second phase began during the period of European colonialism. "Modern" forms of associative life, such as professional associations, trade unions, secular charities, cultural clubs, and Islamist organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, emerged across the region. Many of these organizations were politically active in a way that earlier forms of civil society had not been, and they played an important role in nationalist struggles and in supporting pan-Arab causes.

After Arab countries gained independence, a restrictive third phase began. New regimes feared that pluralistic, independent associative life would undermine national unity—and threaten their own attempts to consolidate power. Thus independent civic activity was brought under tight state control as civil society organizations were transformed into state-dominated institutions or were repressed. Repression was especially harsh in the new Arab socialist republics. (In the case of the Palestinian territories, foreign occupation rather than nationalist governments was the source of repression.)

The fourth phase, which has seen a relative liberalization and diversification of the civil society sphere, began in the 1980s and continues to the present day. Several factors have contributed to this phase. The spread of Islamist movements has led to a proliferation of religiously affiliated groups active in civil society. Many Arab governments began to implement limited economic and political liberalization as a way of staying in power.⁴ They allowed some new NGOs to form, and they expanded the operating space for existing groups. International influences also played a role. The rise of the global human rights and prodemocracy movements encouraged the formation of Arab human rights and democracy organizations. The dramatic increase in foreign aid channeled to NGOs encouraged the growth of these and other civil society groups.

In broad terms, Arab civil society today comprises five sectors. First, in most Arab countries, the Islamic sector—made up of a wide array of groups, associations, and movements whose common objective is upholding and propagating the faith of Islam—is the most active and widespread form of associative life. Islamic organizations provide charitable and social services such as medical care, education, employment assistance, tutoring, and matchmaking, as well as religious instruction and spiritual guidance. Some of these groups have been in existence for many decades; most are newer, being part of the Islamic resurgence.

Although Islamic organizations share the overarching goal of upholding and spreading the faith of Islam, groups in this sector have diverse forms and political orientations. Some Islamic organizations are offshoots of (and are funded by) state religious establishments, and they propagate mainstream religious doctrine through education and charity work. Other groups aim to operate independently. Some, such as ad hoc religious committees that raise funds for Palestinian victims of the Intifada, hope that distance from the bureaucracy will enhance their agility and effectiveness. Others include service organizations affiliated with political movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, that oppose incumbent regimes. The more independent groups are generally funded through tithes (*zakat*) and other local donations and by foreign individuals, charities, and governments.⁵ At the far margins of the Islamic sector are radical clandestine movements, such as Egyptian Islamic Jihad and al Qaeda, that employ terrorism and indoctrination to achieve their vision of a properly “Islamic” society.

The second sector of Arab civil society consists of nongovernmental service organizations, or what are often called service NGOs.⁶ Typically, service NGOs are nonprofit groups that resemble Western nonprofit agencies in some respects. They deliver services such as loans, job training, educational assistance, and community development to the public to complement, or in some cases substitute for, government services.

The service-NGO sector has proliferated since the 1980s. Many Arab governments have come to accept the value of private initiative playing an expanded role in development. Many are also concerned about Islamic opposition movements’ use of charitable organizations to gain grassroots support and therefore are eager for service NGOs to become an alternative source of services. Western donors are eager to aid private initiative, because it reflects their broader policy of supporting market-based economic reforms in the region. Donors often view service NGOs as more efficient recipients of their funds than Arab government bureaucracies.

Though many of the services provided by service NGOs resemble those offered by Islamic organizations, they do not share the Islamic sector’s goal of propagating religion and transforming society toward greater Islamicization. Service NGOs tend to operate openly and according to government regulations.

The third sector includes membership-based professional organizations such as labor unions, professional syndicates (bar associations, doctors’ and engineers’ syndicates, and the like), and chambers of commerce. Their main purpose is to provide economic and social services for their members. Unions and professional syndicates are among the largest civil society organizations in many Arab countries.

In many countries, professional syndicates are the relatively more politically active organizations of civil society, even though they operate under tight government controls. Because of syndicates’ long histories in nationalist politics, and the weakness of Arab political parties, regimes are willing to allow syndicates to provide a space for controlled political activism. Opposition figures (usually Islamists and leftists) compete vigorously for positions on boards of directors. They use these highly visible positions to take stands against government policy, implement programs that will gain members’ support for their cause, and mobilize public opinion. For instance, Jordanian syndicates have been that country’s center of activism against the normalization of relations with Israel.

The fourth sector is composed of associations whose main purpose is to foster solidarity and companionship, and sometimes to provide services, among groups of friends, neighbors, relatives, and colleagues. This sector includes mutual aid societies that help migrants to Egypt’s urban areas who hail

from particular villages, artists' and writers' societies, and youth organizations. In the Gulf countries, the sector also includes *diwaniyyas*, which are regular private gatherings of relatives, friends, and colleagues that serve as forums for socializing, conducting business, and discussing politics (within limits).

The main distinctions between organizations in this fourth sector and service NGOs are in form and funding. In contrast to most service NGOs—which are set up much like Western nonprofit organizations and are typically closely regulated by a country's ministry of social affairs or the ministry of the interior—groups in the fourth sector are often fluid and informally organized and have little interaction with government officials; most are self-funded and few would ever seek government or donor funding. Only a very few engage directly in politics, such as when Kuwaiti *diwaniyyas* back candidates in parliamentary elections. The vast majority are distinctly apolitical, instead being concerned with culture, social identity, and solidarity.

The fifth sector of Arab civil society is composed of prodemocracy associations. It is the sector that most outside democracy promoters and analysts usually think of as making up “Arab civil society.” The organizations in this sector seek to promote democratic change by spreading democratic concepts among their fellow citizens and by pressing Arab governments to adhere to international democratic norms. They carry out democracy-education programs, often targeted at politically marginalized groups such as women and youth; they mobilize citizens to vote, run for office, and observe elections; they monitor governments' human rights practices and press for women's rights; they lobby for changes in laws and government practices and fight corruption; and they research political issues.

Of the five sectors of Arab civil society, the prodemocracy sector is the newest and the most fledgling. The region's first human rights organizations were founded in Tunisia and in the West Bank in the late 1970s. Human rights groups were established in Egypt and Morocco in the 1980s. By the 1990s, a small community of prodemocracy organizations existed in most parts of the Arab world. The expansion of this sector has been fueled by political reforms that loosened some controls on associative life, the influence of the international human rights movement on activists in the region, and the rise of Western aid for democracy promotion. A very tiny percentage of associative life takes place within the fifth sector, because the groups in this zone are significantly smaller in number and membership than the associations in the other four sectors.

The extent and nature of civil society within the Arab world exist along a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum are Oman, Libya, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates—all of which prohibit the establishment of independent citizen organizations and allow only state-run citizen organizations. In Syria, a handful of independent civic groups have sprung up during the slight thaw of the Bashar Al Asad regime, but they have been repressed by the authorities. Any independent civic activity in Libya, if it exists, takes place deep underground. In the aforementioned Gulf countries, what limited civil society exists revolves around *diwaniyyas*, semiofficial Islamic charities, and quasi-official research institutes. Not only are other forms of associative life essentially illegal, but most people's lives revolve extensively around family and tribal ties. Furthermore, oil and gas wealth has reduced the need for service NGOs (and for the foreign aid that has helped them to proliferate).

At the other end of the spectrum are Kuwait, Bahrain, Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Jordan, Yemen, Lebanon, Morocco and the Palestinian territories. Kuwait and Bahrain, which in contrast to other Gulf states have a history of elected parliaments and opposition politics, have a smattering of nongovernmental Islamic societies, professional associations, clubs, and prodemocracy groups. Tunisia's civil society is dominated by a very large service-NGO sector and a few labor unions and

professional associations. Its handful of prodemocracy groups suffer continuous state harassment and have a precarious legal status. Tunisia's Islamic sector consists primarily of associations tied to the government. This is due to Tunisia's history of state-enforced secularism, which intensified in the late 1980s and 1990s with the government's attempts to eradicate an incipient Islamic opposition movement, Al Nahda, and any other independent Islamic activity.

Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen have some civil society activity across all five sectors. They have diverse and active Islamic sectors that include independent, opposition, and government-connected organizations. Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen, as relatively poor Arab countries that receive large amounts of foreign aid, have large service-NGO sectors. Professional associations, mutual aid societies and other clubs, and small numbers of prodemocracy groups also exist in these countries (Egypt and Yemen, with their large numbers of migrant workers, have many mutual aid societies, as does Jordan's sizable Palestinian community).

Morocco, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories are at the farthest end of the civil society spectrum, with the most diverse and active civil societies in the region. In Morocco, this is due to a long history of political pluralism, along with the late King Hassan II's early decision to launch economic and political liberalization, a process that has not been interrupted by his successor, King Mohamed VI.⁷ In Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, years of war and civil conflict have fostered a high degree of political pluralism, which expresses itself through associational life. Weakened central authority also necessitated citizens' self-help and decreased regimes' ability to fully control civil society. (In the Palestinian case, the unusually large amounts of international aid and the elite's high levels of education and their exposure to democratic practices in Israeli politics have also helped to foster a civil society that is the largest and most sophisticated in the Arab world.)

CIVIL SOCIETY: THE SOURCE OF DEMOCRATIZATION?

About a decade ago, scholars in the United States who study the Middle East began to devote a great deal of attention to civil society's role as the source of Arab democratization. This academic interest has now subsided somewhat, but in the meantime enthusiasm for civil society has spread to the mainstream of policy makers, donors, democracy-aid providers, and journalists. These civil society enthusiasts interpret the proliferation of civil society organizations across the region as a harbinger of democratization "from below."

They envision civil society playing a democratizing role in a variety of ways. To some, the very proliferation of civil society organizations—no matter what their type, agenda, or influence—builds the infrastructure of democracy, because in their view an active associational life is a precursor of democracy. The fact that Egypt now has roughly 14,000 registered NGOs, for example, is sometimes cited as a sign of the empowerment of that country's citizens. Others view specific sectors of civil society as forces for democratization. Not surprisingly, prodemocracy NGOs are thought to have the greatest potential to push governments toward democratization. As one specialist declared:

A new era is emerging in Arab politics today, one in which the state will increasingly be forced to retreat before a vibrant civil society. . . . The mushrooming NGO movement is pressing governments to be accountable, to adhere to the rule of law, and to abide by broad principles of good government.⁸

Others locate the seeds of democratic change in the Islamic sector. In their view, the opposition and informal organizations in this sector represent a challenge to the moral and political authority of incumbent authoritarian regimes; their grassroots support gives them a popular appeal and a “vibrancy” that other sectors of civil society lack. Thus they must constitute a prodemocracy movement. “Democracy will find civil society allies . . . among Islamists who have spent much of the past decade building up the social and charitable institutions that meet all the criteria political scientists use to identify civil society,” one expert recently predicted.⁹

Still other civil society advocates see great potential in the service-NGO sector, where involvement in community development is thought to build skills and foster democratic values and attitudes in individuals that will eventually spread to the broader society. “Service NGOs have an impact that goes well beyond service delivery,” contended a paper issued by a contractor of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). “They also enhance the prospects for democratization because they foster associational life, empower individuals, and provide them with the skills and attitudes” that are useful for democratization.¹⁰

Contrary to these optimistic predictions, civil society groups have not made a real dent in the Arab world’s surprisingly durable authoritarianism. Many civil society groups manage to survive and sometimes even become rather active within the limited space regimes have granted them. But they have not been able to expand this space much or to affect the political game more broadly. The growth in the number of civil society organization has not led to democratization. In fact, this proliferation is better understood as a product of top-down liberalization than as a cause of it.

Several factors have contributed to civil society’s weakness as a democratizing force. State repression is perhaps the most obvious one. Although Arab regimes may be poor performers in many respects, they have been unusually successful in maintaining control and quashing dissent.¹¹ As was described above, some governments simply outlaw independent civic activity altogether; and others permit it but impose severe restrictions. These include allowing registered NGOs, professional syndicates, Islamic organizations, and other groups to undertake only “social welfare” or “cultural” work and forbidding “political activities.” They regularly intervene in labor and syndicates’ activities.¹² They require that NGOs’ charters, boards of directors, and meetings be approved by government officials, who can send a representative to any activity. All funding must be approved by the government. Across the region, ministries of the interior investigate NGOs’ staffs and reject applications for registration on security grounds.¹³ In Gaza, for instance, civil society organizations seeking to register must submit the life histories of their founding members to the Palestinian Ministry of the Interior.¹⁴ In Jordan, all NGO volunteers must be vetted by the security services.¹⁵ Many groups prefer to register and submit to these controls because without legal status, they are even more vulnerable to the whims of the state.¹⁶ Regimes also skillfully use emergency laws, harassment by security forces, and arrests to isolate those who cross the line of “unacceptable” civic activity and to deter others who are contemplating it.

Another obvious factor is political culture. The level of independent civic participation across the Arab world remains extremely low. Most civil society organizations attract only a very small percentage of the population; truly active membership is even less. For example, the membership of most unions and professional associations, though numbering in the millions because many professions require people to join, is often dormant. Not only have decades of authoritarian rule bred widespread political apathy, but throughout the Arab world social, economic, and political life

still revolves to a remarkable degree around the bonds of family, clan, or tribe. Thus a critical mass of voluntary citizen activity extending beyond these primary relationships—of the sort that would begin to shift political weight from the realm of state control to that of society and thus contribute to democratization—has yet to develop.

Of course, repression and political apathy are hallmarks of all authoritarian settings. Yet, in some such settings, civil society organizations have played a central role in popularizing the idea of democratic change and in mobilizing citizens to push for democratization.¹⁷ Thus we must locate deeper reasons for Arab civil society's minimal democratizing influence to date.

As was noted in the introduction, civil society is best understood in neutral terms, as the zone of voluntary associative life beyond family and clan ties and separate from the market. The *form and character* of such associative life can differ considerably, depending on the context. In democracies, the vast majority of civil society organizations are indeed civil and prodemocratic, influenced by a free political atmosphere, the rule of law, and the prevailing social consensus in favor of democratic values. But civil society organizations are not inherently counterhegemonic or liberal; particularly in authoritarian environments, civil society can be dominated by apolitical, progovernment, or even illiberal groups that fulfill roles other than democratization. For civil society to play a democratizing role in such settings, a critical mass of organizations and movements must develop three key attributes: autonomy from the regime, a prodemocracy agenda, and the ability to build coalitions with other sectors of civil society (and other forces, such as political parties) to push for democratic change. Civil society in the Arab world has not yet acquired these attributes.

Sectors of civil society that could ostensibly be a platform for the development of a prodemocracy movement are not sufficiently autonomous to do so. The webs of control and co-optation are spun in various ways. Labor unions are essentially arms of the state, with their leadership appointed by the government. Professional associations sometimes have more independent leaderships, but their members, like union members, are largely state employees or depend on government goodwill for their economic survival. Chambers of commerce are dominated by businessmen and businesswomen who similarly rely on close economic and personal ties to government officials for their business success.

Many think tanks are not truly independent; they are staffed by private citizens but receive all their funding from the government. More nefariously, security services have infiltrated the prodemocracy sector, creating “nongovernmental” organizations to duplicate the work of and siphon donor funds from genuinely independent groups. Donors have difficulty distinguishing these front organizations from the real thing.¹⁸ More commonly, regimes have neutralized groups whose activities are deemed too sensitive by applying a combination of sticks (the threat of repression) and carrots (funding and political protection). (The region is replete with stories of feisty civil society activists who quiet down after receiving generous government funding, a sinecure, or other perks.)

The service-NGO sector, which because of its size is sometimes viewed as a potential counterweight to state power, is in fact largely an extension of it. Many service NGOs were established by former state employees; current and former officials often serve on the boards of directors. Most registered service NGOs receive significant government funding. The Kuwaiti government, for example, gives all registered voluntary associations meeting space and annual subsidies.¹⁹ Labor unions, chambers of commerce, and even professional associations whose leadership opposes some state policies, rely on government ties to protect their economic interests. Such intertwining relationships make those civil society groups reluctant to take actions that could jeopardize their ties to the officials who facilitate

their work. Similarly, there are complex relationships between some parts of the Islamic sector and Arab governments. In some cases, regimes have facilitated the creation of certain Islamic groups as a counterweight to secular opposition groups. Others are offshoots of the religious establishment and thus do not seek Arab governments' demise.

The fact that a critical mass of civil society organizations has not adopted a clear prodemocracy agenda that can mobilize large numbers of citizens is another important characteristic of civil society in Arab countries. The informal parts of civil society are generally not politically inclined; and their very informality would hinder their ability to organize politically. As for service NGOs, a few have conducted advocacy campaigns to improve government policy on issues on which they work (such as the environment or rural development). But the majority do not engage in broader political activities—especially anything involving direct opposition to incumbent regimes. Beyond the fact that most are financially and administratively linked to the state, their fundamental mission is not to challenge systems and institutions of politics. Rather, it is to provide the services and socioeconomic development necessary to maintain social stability.

Indeed, when Arab leaders boast of their countries' burgeoning civil societies, as they often do, they are referring to service NGOs and similar organizations that are carrying out their own national development agenda. Thus regimes view these groups as "partners," not adversaries. As Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak explained in a November 2003 speech, "In recognition by the society of the fact that national development requires conscious participation by all members, there emerged a new concept of voluntary work. The number of civil society organizations rose to more than 14,000, operating in a variety of development spheres They perform their role as an active partner to the sustainable development process."²⁰

Even those service NGOs that do not buy into the official development agenda are usually reluctant to jeopardize their work by running afoul of the authorities. As a staff member of an Egyptian development organization explained, "We don't like the government, but to be able to do our vital work, we cannot get anywhere close to politics."²¹ Similarly, the priorities of most unions, professional organizations, and mutual aid societies lie in serving their members, not in democratic activism. (This is the case even for Palestinian civil society, the region's most active. Since the outbreak of the Intifada in September 2000, most Palestinian groups have focused on delivering services to a population under siege and on struggling against the Israeli occupation.) Certainly, there are informal, grassroots groups that resist state power, but their very informality makes it hard for them to galvanize broader support. This is in contrast to service NGOs and community groups in South Africa, the Philippines, and many Latin American countries that had a double agenda of development and democratic political change and could mobilize their communities toward both ends.

Nor does the Islamic sector constitute a prodemocracy force. Religious forces' adoption of a vigorous prodemocracy agenda is often a critical element in civil society's ability to push for democratization, as has been demonstrated by the role of the Catholic Church in Latin America and in Eastern European democratization and of Christian organizations in South Korean democratization. In contrast, the Arab world's Islamic organizations are by and large at most ambivalent toward democracy.²² In some Arab countries, a handful of liberal Islamists seek to demonstrate that democratic concepts are fully compatible with the tenets of Islam. But they are weak and lack popular following.²³ Those parts of the Islamic sector that are politically relevant, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, have not pushed for democracy in a comprehensive fashion. Some emphasize themes of justice, participation, and reform.

But they hold vague or negative positions on other aspects of democracy, such as the rotation of power and minorities' and women's rights. Other Islamic groups avoid political issues altogether, preferring to transform society through social and spiritual change.

The sector of civil society that does have a clear democratic agenda—the prodemocracy sector—has very limited influence. There are high-caliber groups that bravely push the political envelope and sustain repeated harassment. But even the most impressive prodemocracy groups have trouble attracting more than a tiny number of supporters. Most prodemocracy groups that have tried to lobby government officials for policy change have done so using their personal connections to those officials, not by mobilizing popular support for their cause.

Repression is undoubtedly one reason for their ineffectiveness; precarious funding and weak management also play a role. But there are more fundamental reasons. In sharp contrast to Islamic organizations, which use religious channels to mobilize support, prodemocracy groups lack a popular network and tools, such as a sympathetic media, to spread a prodemocracy message. They have to fight the stigma that democracy and human rights are foreign—particularly Western—concepts. Exacerbating this challenge, prodemocracy NGOs are overwhelmingly the province of the secular, liberal elite. Their discourse (highly abstract) and activities (mainly workshops and reports) often seem alien to the real-life concerns of Arabs.

Finally, as is clear from the preceding analysis, civil society across the Arab world is deeply fragmented. The different sectors of civil society sometimes work side by side but can rarely coalesce in a sustained fashion. This hinders the ability of civil society to unite groups of citizens around common goals in a way that might generate pressure on regimes. Contrast this, for example, with the sustained civic action that brought together South Korean students, workers, Christian activists, and intellectuals to push for democracy in the years leading up to that country's transition.

In part, this polarization is due to regimes' skill in manipulating and dividing civil society. But it also reflects a deeper reality: There is today no unifying vision for social and political transformation among key civil society actors in Arab countries. In countries with deep social divisions, such as Lebanon, civil society is organized overwhelmingly along confessional lines, with groups serving primarily as patronage vehicles to protect community interests.²⁴ More often, the major divide falls between the two sectors of civil society most relevant for democratization, the Islamic sector (because of its grassroots support) and the prodemocracy sector. A deep polarization exists between those who want to use civil society organizations as the leading vehicle to Islamicize society and those who believe that (liberal) civil society is the only bulwark against such a transformation.

The experience of civil society in Algeria and Tunisia provides a vivid example of this phenomenon. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, many prodemocracy groups in these two countries initially sided with Islamic opposition groups to press for liberalization. A few years later, when the Algerian and Tunisian regimes felt threatened and undertook blanket repression against Islamists and other independent political forces, these same groups lent their support to the regimes. They feared the Islamists' illiberal agenda more than they feared a rollback of their civil liberties and the regimes' continuation in power. Lise Garon terms these tacit bargains "dangerous alliances" and identifies them as a key factor in stalled political liberalization in the Arab world.²⁵

These characteristics of civil society are not necessarily permanent. Various developments could lead civil society groups to become more autonomous, more prodemocratic, and more coherent.

Economic growth could provide independent resources for some organizations currently tied to regimes; conversely, severe economic decline could spark discontent.

The rise of truly charismatic leaders in the prodemocracy sector, their access to new avenues for mobilization (such as new media), or a sudden deterioration of human rights conditions (if such groups were widely seen as defenders of ordinary citizens' rights) could enhance the local prestige and appeal of this sector. A changing relationship between Islamist and liberal political forces (for example, the emergence of a liberal Islamist trend, or the Islamicization of the prodemocracy sector) could increase the prospect of coalitions across sectors.

Equally as important is what occurs in the broader national arena. When civil society organizations have played a vigorous role in democratic political change, they have gained real influence only after higher-order developments have reshaped the environment in their favor. For example, the economic failure in Eastern Europe delegitimized regimes and enhanced the stature of civil society actors after years of being marginal actors, enabling them to popularize their ideas and mobilize wide support at last. Similarly, the massive economic collapse in Indonesia unleashed mass discontent and made President Suharto suddenly vulnerable. This transformed the environment to allow civil society groups and opposition parties to mobilize citizens in an unprecedented fashion.

In the Arab world, similar changes could include an economic breakdown, or success followed by decline; the rise of new regime elites sympathetic to democratic reform; a breakdown in the security structure; and political liberalization that allows more competitive elections, elected institutions with power to challenge the executive branch, or the lifting of restrictions on the media.

AID FOR CIVIL SOCIETY: A DISAPPOINTING RECORD

American democracy promoters, along with their European counterparts, tend to have an understanding of civil society that is simultaneously too broad and too narrow. On the one hand, they frequently vest unrealistic hopes in civil society as a democratic and democratizing force. They envision that, bolstered by outside assistance, virtuous civil societies of democratic-minded, nonpartisan, peaceful citizens will erode authoritarian regimes. They often also expect these civil society groups to operate as they are thought to in the United States or Europe—that is, to act as a counterweight to state power and to “check” or otherwise influence government behavior—and they provide assistance to help them do so.

On the other hand, donors conceive of civil society quite narrowly, as comprising the organizations—nonprofit organizations and public interest groups—that seem to resemble those with which they are most familiar in their own countries and whose leaders speak English and are comfortable in international circles. Donors often downplay or ignore religious organizations, social movements, and other unfamiliar, non-NGO forms of associative life. They also fail to take into account the relationship of the different parts of civil society to citizens, governments, and one another.

This double-edged tendency has existed in American democracy-promotion efforts in the Arab world as well, even though until recently the United States paid scant attention to the question of democracy there. In the early 1990s, near the end of the George H. W. Bush administration, the United States launched small-scale programs to aid democracy in the Middle East, adding to this

assistance occasional rhetorical support for political reform at the diplomatic level. This approach continued during the administration of Bill Clinton, which increased democracy aid to the region largely to avoid being seen as excluding the Middle East from its global democracy-promotion agenda. “Aiding civil society” was the leading element of U.S. efforts. The majority of democracy aid for the Middle East from 1991 through 2001—about \$150 million—went to projects classified as “civil society strengthening.”²⁶ At the same time, these projects were targeted almost exclusively toward service NGOs and prodemocracy NGOs.²⁷

Projects to assist service NGOs received the lion’s share of the funding. These projects were large-budget, multiyear efforts that involved many dozens of service NGOs. In Egypt, USAID funded two consecutive projects to strengthen civil society, which respectively cost \$27 million and \$40 million. In the West Bank and Gaza—where the United States had funded some Palestinian NGOs during the Israeli occupation—after the Palestinian Authority was created in 1994, the United States expanded this aid and categorized much of it as civil society strengthening. In 2000, USAID launched a \$32 million project to support Palestinian NGOs (mostly service NGOs). In Lebanon, USAID spent several million dollars to assist community-based service NGOs during the 1990s.

Promoting democracy was not the only rationale for these projects. In Egypt, the United States believed that giving private groups an expanded role in development would advance its larger policy goal of economic liberalization. In the West Bank and Gaza, the United States hoped to generate popular support for the Oslo peace process by helping Palestinian NGOs improve living conditions under self-rule. (In addition, NGOs were a key instrument for channeling aid, because Congress had imposed a ban on direct U.S. funding of the Palestinian Authority.) In Lebanon, the United States wanted to help local communities rebuild in the aftermath of civil war. Because government agencies were very weak, community-based organizations and NGOs were better aid partners. During the Clinton administration, political Islam became a factor, though not one that was openly acknowledged. Some U.S. officials saw service NGOs as a potential counterweight to the Islamic charities and other groups that were a major source of grassroots support for Islamist opposition movements, and these officials wanted to direct resources to such groups for this reason.

Service NGOs also fit well into the vision for Middle Eastern democracy that prevailed among U.S. officials in the 1990s, vague as it was. According to this vision, democratic change should occur incrementally, with a minimum of conflict that might threaten the stability of incumbent regimes friendly to Washington. The critical element in this very gradual democratization would not be the election of new leaderships, or even a reduction in authoritarian regimes’ powers or further liberalization of the political sphere. Rather, it would be the reform of existing government institutions to make them work more efficiently and thus more “democratically,” along with citizens’ habituation to democratic values and practices. State and society should be prepared for a future democratic transition before any Arab leadership should be required to submit itself to the will of the people or significantly expand political space. Such preparation was considered essential for Arab countries with little or no experience with democracy.

Service NGOs would expose Arabs to a form of microdemocracy, the thinking went, by habituating them to the concepts of civic participation and decision making through taking part in nonthreatening local issues (while avoiding core issues of civil and political rights). This would build an understanding of and enthusiasm for democracy from the ground up, preparing citizens to make responsible decisions when, at some point in the future, they were given a larger role in influencing national policies.²⁸

Service NGOs were also appealing because they were non-Islamist, and at the same time nonpolitical.²⁹ Thus they were less likely to pose a threat to regimes (or to U.S. interests in the region) in the way that other sectors of civil society might if they were empowered. If service NGOs demonstrated to governments that they were professional, nonpartisan organizations that had the community's best interests at heart, it was thought, governments would be more likely to see them as constructive forces, rather than as sources of opposition needing to be repressed. This realization would compel officials to grant more space to those sectors of civil society that acted responsibly (that is, that did not challenge the state's legitimacy).³⁰ This would somehow spur a broader dynamic in which governments would allow greater citizen input into decision making, leading, in some fashion, to democracy.³¹ (Of course, putting the onus on civil society to generate change would also lessen the need to press friendly governments on political reform.)

Assistance programs sought to build service NGOs' capacity as vehicles for citizen participation and as partners with governments.³² USAID provided technical assistance in accounting, staff development, management, fund raising, and program planning, as well as training in so-called democracy skills (the ability to encourage participation, network, aggregate citizen demands, and exercise oversight of government agencies).³³ In the late 1990s, USAID began to emphasize advocacy training for service NGOs. Advocacy was defined as a participatory but nonpolitical activity. As a report on assistance to Egyptian civil society explained, "Advocacy is defined as an action, rooted in a broad-based community need or interest, taken by NGOs to represent themselves and their constituency to public officials or the public in general. In the Egyptian case, *this is exclusive of religious and political interests*"³⁴ (emphasis added).

Prodemocracy groups were also included in the democratization vision, though they figured in it somewhat less prominently. The United States saw them, like service NGOs, as vehicles for microparticipation and as incubators of democratic values within society. Instead of being potential partners of governments, however, prodemocracy groups were considered enclaves of reform and benign opposition. Most U.S. aid to prodemocracy groups was in the form of small, short-term grants. (For many years, such grants came directly from American embassies in the region in a very decentralized fashion. With the establishment in 1997 of the Department of State's Middle East Democracy Fund, a regional small grants fund was created and additional funding was provided to USAID to assist prodemocracy groups.) Funding supported financial management and institutional development and projects in civic education, election observation, voter education, human rights monitoring, anticorruption efforts, and women's empowerment. As with service NGOs, in the late 1990s the United States put a special emphasis on advocacy training.³⁵

Funding for prodemocracy organizations was much less than that channeled to service NGOs. Prodemocracy groups are fewer in number and smaller in size than most service NGOs, making large amounts of funding difficult to absorb. Also, some groups were excluded (or excluded themselves) from assistance because they were outspoken critics of Arab regimes close to the United States and of U.S. policies in the Middle East.

Although the impact of these programs was quite limited, the assistance they provided was clearly valuable in certain respects. U.S. assistance supported the vital work performed by many service NGOs. Support for beleaguered prodemocracy groups across the region helped to keep these groups alive and to maintain a political space, albeit a small one, for their work. With U.S. aid, some groups improved their professional capacities, and they conducted programs that helped to break down taboos on sensitive issues such as corruption and women's rights.

Where civil society assistance fell short was in contributing to a process of democratization. The tens of millions of dollars in aid did not generate popular demand for democracy, alter Arab governments' intolerance of independent citizen activism, or spur a broader dynamic of political change. Though it is certainly unrealistic to expect external assistance programs to decisively affect the political direction of any Arab society, U.S. civil society aid can nevertheless be seen as flawed in two fundamental respects.

First was the manner in which civil society assistance was implemented. Programs involving service NGOs tended to be overly bureaucratic and micromanaged. U.S. contractors served as "pass-through agencies" for USAID funds, assembling large staffs to disperse grants to NGOs and to provide technical assistance. The rationale for this top-heavy arrangement was that outside contractors were needed because USAID was too understaffed to oversee what sometimes amounted to tens of millions of dollars in NGO grants. The result, however, was to create a bureaucratic superstructure that was reminiscent of some of the restrictions Arab governments place on NGOs. To be considered for funding, NGOs had to submit detailed proposals; once approved, they had to undergo various training programs and meet strict accounting and reporting requirements. Although the need for the accountability of funds is understandable, such requirements were beyond the capacity of most groups.

Aid for prodemocracy groups often suffered from the opposite problem: too much informality. This assistance was typically for short-term, one-off projects, with little follow-up. Across the board, the evaluation of civil society projects was superficial, rarely getting past the question of how many activities were completed to probe the deeper issue of whether the assistance contributed to political change.

Many civil society assistance programs were also overly instrumental. That is, the United States often looked upon NGOs as instruments to advance its own agenda. The result was that too often civil society assistance was designed around an American agenda of what issues NGOs should focus on and how. Financially strapped NGOs usually try to be responsive to such donor agendas in the hope of receiving funding, even when the recommended activities do not have much local resonance. This phenomenon is evident in the large numbers of Arab NGOs working on the environment and on women's issues, recent donor favorites, as well as in the launching of advocacy campaigns by service NGOs that have never before undertaken such activities. The line between donors' useful suggestion of new ideas and the imposition of an external agenda is a fine one. When the latter takes over, the result is programs that undermine the concept of civil society as a sphere where indigenous citizen groups pursue causes and activities of their own choosing.

The second and larger problem was the fact that civil society aid was based on a flawed vision of civil society, its weaknesses, and its role in democratization. The U.S. conception of civil society equated the sectors it considered politically acceptable—service NGOs and certain prodemocracy groups—with civil society writ large. This had the effect of targeting assistance to the groups with the least political influence or the shallowest roots in the community and thus placing unrealistic expectations on them. In adopting such a narrow definition of civil society, assistance providers lacked a full understanding of how these groups fit into the broader sphere of civil society and why some citizens were more drawn to other forms of associative life. Narrowly targeted aid also missed the opportunity to help groups develop links to and build coalitions across sectors.

Assistance providers also misdiagnosed the reasons for civil society organizations' weaknesses as agents of democratic change. Too often, NGOs' lack of political influence was attributed mainly to

their lack of professionalism—often meaning the ways in which they differed from Western NGOs. Many NGOs do suffer from poor financial management and undemocratic internal practices, and many influential American NGOs are well managed. But there is no proven direct link between stellar accounting procedures and staff management and influence as an agent of democratic change in an authoritarian setting. More often, civil society groups derive political influence from charismatic leadership, activities and messages that appeal to a broad audience, deep community support, and the ability to mobilize diverse followers around their cause. As was explained above, service NGOs were unlikely to become the vanguard of democratic change or lead governments to relax political controls on civil society, regardless of these groups' professionalism; prodemocracy groups struggled with the problem of isolation as much as they faced management challenges.

Nor did assistance adequately address the problem of many civil society groups' lack of autonomy. At the diplomatic level, the United States largely ignored or downplayed the restrictive legal frameworks and other repressive measures that profoundly shaped the environment for civil society. Out of a similar desire not to ruffle diplomatic feathers, U.S. officials sometimes allowed Arab governments to decide which NGOs should receive funding and what activities they could pursue. Such close interaction enabled government agencies to further penetrate and control civil society.³⁶

Finally, expectations about how democratization would occur were unrealistic. Projects that encouraged closer NGO–government interaction and cooperation had no demonstrable effect on improving the environment for civil society. With regard to advocacy programs, encouraging NGOs with dubious popular support to press government officials for policy changes raises the question of on whose behalf they are advocating. This approach bypasses the role of political parties in representing constituency interests to government, a key element of a democratic process. Moreover, encouraging advocacy on issues that excluded “religious and political” interests had the effect of encouraging a buzz of activity around marginal issues while core issues of power, contestation, and identity were supposed to remain taboo. Real advocacy must at some point touch on these issues, sensitive as they are.

The hope that microparticipation in civil society groups would generate broader democratic reform was similarly unrealistic. Democratization requires, among other things, an opening at the higher level of political institutions, contestation for national office, and expanded political liberties. These changes cannot be brought about by small numbers of citizens working to improve neighborhood garbage collection. Participation in ground-level community activities is valuable for many reasons, but such participation gains political meaning only when it leads to genuine empowerment.

CONCLUSION: THE NEW PUSH

As the U.S. administration looks for ways to translate President Bush's vision of the second track of Middle East democratization into on-the-ground policies and aid programs, civil society is likely to receive ample attention.

Already, “civil society strengthening” is a visible component of the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), the State Department's new, several-hundred-million-dollar effort to promote

reform in the Arab world beyond Iraq. In his December 2002 speech launching the initiative, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell declared that the United States would seek partnerships with “community leaders to close the freedom gap with projects to strengthen civil society” and would strengthen “the civic institutions that protect individual rights and provide opportunities for participation.” MEPI’s political reform “pillar,” one of four categories under which the initiative’s programs are organized, has “strengthening civil society” as one of its leading objectives. To date, MEPI has funded several civil society programs, and new programs are in the pipeline. Outside the MEPI framework, USAID’s large, multiyear NGO assistance programs in Egypt and in the West Bank and Gaza are still under way.

In his January 2004 State of the Union address, President Bush proposed that Congress double the National Endowment for Democracy’s (NED’s) budget, to support new initiatives in the Middle East. Although NED operates independently of the U.S. government, this proposed new funding suggests the administration’s interest in civil society because NED focuses heavily on aiding NGOs.

Civil society aid can be a valuable component of U.S. democracy promotion in the Middle East. But in this new phase, efforts to assist civil society should be free of three myths that have hampered previous efforts in this domain, and they should avoid the shortcomings of earlier programs.

Letting Go of Myths

The first myth is that democratization in authoritarian countries can occur without real politics and without conflict. The United States often seems to embrace a vision of civil society drawn from the “people power” model—citizens embracing democratic values and banding together to fight authoritarian rule. But at the same time, the United States is attracted to the idea of supporting civil society in the Middle East because it seems safely nonpolitical. The United States continues to be extremely apprehensive about real citizen mobilization in the Arab world and does not want civil society to play a mobilizing role. But in cases of democratic transitions where citizen movements emerged as an important democratic force, the decisive stages of such activism usually came not with microparticipation through NGOs but with mass politics of a conflictive nature, such as mobilization, protests, and demonstrations. Such politics are often accompanied by extensive unrest and violence (for example, many hundreds of Indonesians were killed in the 1998 protests that pushed Suharto from power). This is not to suggest that the United States should encourage unrest and violence, obviously, but rather to point out that fundamental political change is always destabilizing to a certain extent.

The second myth is that civil society activism can alone create a democratic opening. In every case where citizen activism emerged as an important force in political change, it could only do so after broader social, economic, or political changes created new conditions that enabled this to happen.

The third myth is that civil society consists of latent democratic forces simply awaiting activation by Western donors. As was discussed above, in the Middle East different parts of civil society play different roles, and only some sectors have the potential or inclination to push for democratic change. It is unlikely that donor assistance can change this.

The Way Forward

New efforts to aid civil society in Arab countries should:

- ***Focus on assisting civil society organizations that could play a role in political change.*** Assistance to service NGOs should be shifted to the category of economic development. These groups are not catalysts for political reform or democratization, but they deserve support because of their important role in development.
- ***Avoid perpetuating the narrow focus on the “usual suspects.”*** U.S. officials and democracy-promotion organizations should make contact with as many parts of civil society as possible. This includes a broader range of prodemocracy groups, professional associations that are potentially important players in political liberalization, Islamic organizations, and informal civil society organizations. Such organizations may shun U.S. support or, in the case of informal groups, be ill equipped to absorb it. But opening channels of communication to new sectors of civil society will help the United States better understand the entire civil society sphere and improve assistance to those sectors with which it can cooperate.
- ***Think more strategically about civil society assistance.*** Donors should develop programs that address the deeper reasons for civil society organizations’ weakness as agents of democratic change and provide assistance that addresses the issue of repressive legal frameworks. They should help prodemocracy NGOs make their discourse and activities resonate more at the grassroots level and help them reach new audiences (perhaps through new media). Donors also should support opportunities for cross-sector collaboration, making the encouragement of civil society autonomy a priority by avoiding programs that allow Arab governments to control civil society funding or activities or that otherwise perpetuate control of civil society. If Arab governments insist on such control as a condition of assistance, donors should postpone the program until the controls are lifted. Finally, donors should help NGOs develop strategies for raising community funds, to decrease reliance on government subsidies.
- ***Think more broadly about assisting civil society.*** In many Arab countries, the legalization of new political parties, the holding of more competitive elections, or a lifting of press restrictions can stimulate political openings of which civil society organizations can take advantage, and which expand opportunities for civil society to engage with political society. Donors should therefore combine direct assistance to civil society groups with indirect activities such as political-party development and encouraging more competitive elections and greater media freedom.
- ***Avoid cookie-cutter programs.*** The nature of civil society differs significantly in Kuwait and Morocco, Jordan and the Palestinian territories, Egypt and Tunisia; aid programs should not look exactly the same in each.
- ***Involve civil society organizations more extensively in needs assessments, program design, and evaluation.*** In addition, donors should shift away from programs that focus inordinately on training NGOs to receive and manage donor funds for donor-conceived activities.
- ***Reinforce themes of civil society assistance at the diplomatic level.*** Donors should raise the issues of overly restrictive NGO laws, the harassment of human rights groups, and other factors in the repression of civil society activity with Arab governments on a regular basis.

The Real Challenge

Aiding civil society abroad is more difficult than it might seem. This is not only because civil society is likely to play a more modest role in democratization than is often expected. Improving assistance in the ways described above will require policy makers and aid providers to display a level of patience, flexibility, and knowledge of local history, language, and culture that is typically lacking in U.S. democracy assistance, especially when the pressure is on to demonstrate quick results to Congress. Furthermore, despite the hubris that permeates the current American discourse about “transforming” the Middle East, the most important factors affecting civil society’s democratizing potential in Arab countries (or in any country, for that matter) are beyond outsiders’ direct influence. U.S. assistance at best can play a modest positive role.

Effective civil society assistance requires a sense of genuine partnership and a vision for change that is shared by donors and civil society organizations. In this regard, the Middle East poses a profound challenge in that civil society assistance cannot be separated from the broader context of U.S. relations with the Arab world. Such relations, though never close, have only grown more volatile since Washington launched the new policy of promoting democracy in the region. Widespread opposition to U.S. policy in Iraq and the Palestinian territories may be fostering a solidarity previously lacking among polarized sectors of civil society. It remains to be seen whether this will spill over into the realm of domestic politics and lead to the forging of new coalitions for democratic change.

In the meantime, the anti-American tone of Arab political discourse, along with security concerns across the region, make it difficult for U.S. officials to reach out to new parts of civil society. This tension is also leading civil society groups—especially those with the most credibility—to steer clear of U.S. assistance for fear that accepting it will taint them irrecoverably. Exacerbating this situation are U.S. counterterrorism measures, which require extensive vetting of all NGOs that are potential recipients of U.S. funding.³⁷

Thus until U.S.–Arab relations improve, U.S. attempts to reach out meaningfully to Arab civil society are likely to be complicated by the realities of regional politics as much as by the challenges of democracy promotion.

NOTES

- ¹ “Remarks by the President at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy,” speech delivered on November 6, 2003; www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-3.html.
- ² Political parties are not part of civil society. Parties’ main objective is to capture and exercise political power through elected public office. Although some civil society groups may seek to influence the political process, gaining public office is not their objective. The media are also a sphere separate from civil society. The media’s market-based character and role as a vehicle for public communication differ from civil society’s voluntary character and role as a vehicle for citizen association and collective activity. However, political parties and independent media are often closely intertwined with civil society, in that civil society organizations can share their philosophy, political agenda, and membership.
- ³ See Gordon White, “Civil Society, Democratization, and Development (I): Clearing the Analytical Ground,” *Democratization*, vol. 1, no. 3 (autumn 1994): 375–90; Gordon White, “Civil Society, Democratization, and Development (II): Two Country Cases,” *Democratization*, vol. 2, no. 2 (summer 1995): 56–84; Thomas Carothers, “Think Again: Civil Society,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 117 (winter 1999/2000): 18–29; Marina Ottaway and Thomas Carothers, eds., *Funding Virtue: Civil Society Aid and Democracy Promotion* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000); and Neera Chandhoke, “The ‘Civil’ and the ‘Political’ in Civil Society,” *Democratization*, vol. 8, no. 2 (summer 2001): 1–24.
- ⁴ For an analysis of Arab liberalization motivations and strategies, see Daniel Brumberg, *Liberalization Versus Democracy: Understanding Arab Political Reform*, Carnegie Endowment Working Paper 37 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003).
- ⁵ For a useful overview of the Islamic sector in Egypt, see Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
- ⁶ For background on this sector, see Denis J. Sullivan, “NGOs and Development in the Arab World: The Critical Importance of a Strong Partnership Between Government and Civil Society,” *Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World*, vol. 9, no. 102 (June 2000): 1–18; and Sarah Ben Nefissa, *NGOs, Governments, and Development in the Arab World*, MOST Discussion Paper 46 (Paris: Management of Social Transformations Program, UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 2001), 1–35.
- ⁷ See Azzedine Layachi, *State, Society, and Democracy in Morocco: The Limits of Associative Life* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1998).
- ⁸ Laith Kubba, “The Awakening of Civil Society,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 11, no. 3 (July 2000): 85–86.
- ⁹ Noah Feldman, *After Jihad: America and the Struggle for Islamic Democracy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 227.
- ¹⁰ Chemonics International for U.S. Agency for International Development, *Final Report: Democratic Institutions Support Project* (Washington, D.C.: Chemonics International, 1996), A-22. The Democratic Institutions Support (DIS) project was USAID’s main attempt during the 1990s to develop a strategic framework for promoting democracy in the Arab world. The DIS project, which was implemented by Chemonics International, had a major influence on democracy assistance to the region during the administration of Bill Clinton.
- ¹¹ Eva Bellin argues that “in the MENA [Middle East and North Africa] it is the stalwart will and capacity of the state’s coercive apparatus to suppress any glimmers of democratic initiative that have extinguished the possibility of transition. Here is where the region’s true exceptionalism lies.” Eva Bellin, “The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective,” *Comparative Politics*, vol. 36, no. 2 (January 2004): 139–57.
- ¹² For a description of the Egyptian government’s measures to control professional associations, see Ninette S. Fahmy, “The Performance of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Egyptian Syndicates: An Alternative Formula for Reform,” *Middle East Journal*, vol. 52, no. 4 (autumn 1998): 551–62.
- ¹³ See Amani Kandil, *Civil Society in the Arab World: Private Voluntary Organizations* (Washington, D.C.: Civicus, 1995); Denis Sullivan, *Non-Governmental Organizations and Freedom of Association: Palestine and Egypt, a Comparative Analysis* (Jerusalem: Passia, 1995); and Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Civil Society as Social Control: State Power in Jordan,” *Comparative Politics*, vol. 33, no. 1 (October 2000): 43–61.
- ¹⁴ The registration process for “charitable or civil society organizations” in Gaza, for instance, requires founding members to submit to the Ministry of the Interior their curriculum vitae detailing current and former political affiliations, countries to which they have traveled, the date and reason for any detentions, the names of three close friends, and a summary of main events in the lives of the members. See Ribhi Qatamish, *Registration of Charitable Associations and CSOs: A Study of Legal and Administrative Procedures* (Washington, D.C.: Chemonics International / Tamkeen West Bank and Gaza Civil Society and Democracy Strengthening Project, 2003), IV-2. Similar regulations are in force throughout the region.

- ¹⁵ See Quintan Wiktorowicz, “The Informal Islamic Philanthropy Sector: The Limits of Formal Charities and Prospects for Innovation in Jordan,” paper presented at the “Adaptation, Creativity, and Dynamism in Contemporary Muslim Philanthropy” seminar, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, October 10, 2003.
- ¹⁶ The implementation of even more restrictive NGO laws could drive some organizations to leave the voluntary sector and reregister as civil companies and consulting firms, a process that may be under way in Cairo. This could give organizations more leeway to operate for a time, but it could also change their character as voluntary organizations by making the profit motive more important to their work.
- ¹⁷ See Michael W. Foley, “Laying the Groundwork: The Struggle for Civil Society in El Salvador,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, vol. 38, no. 1 (spring 1996): 67–104; Mehran Kamrava and Frank O’Mora, “Civil Society and Democratization in Comparative Perspective: Latin America and the Middle East,” *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 5 (1998): 893–916; Valerie Bunce, “Rethinking Recent Democratization: Lessons from the Postcommunist Experience,” *World Politics*, vol. 55 (January 2003): 167–92; White, “Civil Society, Democratization, and Development (II),” 56–84; Marina Ottaway, “Social Movements, Professionalization of Reform, and Democracy in Africa,” in *Funding Virtue*, 77–104; and Mary Racelis, “New Visions and Strong Actions: Civil Society in the Philippines,” in *Funding Virtue*, 159–87.
- ¹⁸ Julia Pitner, “NGOs’ Dilemmas,” *Middle East Report*, no. 214 (spring 2000): 34–37; Nadia Khouri-Dagher, “Arab NGOs: The Difficulty of Being Independent,” *Sources*, no. 124 (June 2000): 6–7; author’s personal interviews with NGO officials in Cairo and Yemen, May 2001, and in the West Bank, February 2003.
- ¹⁹ Haya Al Mughni, *Women in Kuwait: The Politics of Gender* (London: Saqi Books, 2000), 37–39.
- ²⁰ President Mubarak’s Address to a Joint Session of the People’s Assembly and the Shura Council, November 19, 2003; www.sis.gov.eg/online/html110/o191123v.htm.
- ²¹ Author’s interview with Egyptian NGO official, Cairo, May 2001.
- ²² The question of Islamists’ perspectives on democracy is complex. For synopses of the main issues, see Guilain Denoex, “Analyzing Political Islam: Debating Key Concepts and Their Implications,” paper prepared for the Asia and Near East Bureau and the Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance, U.S. Agency for International Development, March 2002; Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 360–76; Gudrun Kramer, “Islamist Notions of Democracy,” in *Political Islam: Essays from Middle East Report*, ed. Joel Beinin and Joe Stork (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 71–82.
- ²³ On the weakness of liberal Islamists, see Emmanuel Sivan, “The Struggle within Islam,” *Survival*, vol. 45, no. 1 (spring 2003): 25–44.
- ²⁴ See Paul Kingston, “Patrons, Clients, and Civil Society: A Case Study of Environmental Politics in Postwar Lebanon,” *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 1 (winter 2001): 55–72.
- ²⁵ Lise Garon, *Dangerous Alliances: Media, Civil Society, and Democratization in North Africa* (London: Zed Books, 2003).
- ²⁶ The information and analysis in this section are based on the author’s review of U.S. democracy-assistance strategies, reports, and other documents and interviews with U.S. officials, democracy-assistance organizations, and members of Arab civil society groups conducted from 2000 to 2003.
- ²⁷ During the 1990s, the United States funded a few programs to support labor unions in several Middle Eastern countries, but these programs were classified as activities concerned with economic reform, not democracy promotion.
- ²⁸ As an assessment of USAID’s civil society programs explained: “People learn about democracy by practicing it. Civil society is empowered by people taking an active role in decisions on the management of community resources. Greater access to decision making fosters effective participation, thereby generating greater popular demand for participation. . . . Participants will seek over time to ensure that the rules of the political game are fair and in doing so, will democratize their polities” (Chemonics International for U.S. Agency for International Development, *Final Report*, B-5).
- ²⁹ An assessment of Moroccan civil society conducted for USAID recommended that the United States focus funding on service NGOs because “in the wake of this [Islamist] threat to the legitimacy of states in the region, non-politically threatening NGOs in Morocco represent an attractive alternative” to more political democracy and human rights NGOs and to Islamic organizations (USAID, *Strengthening NGOs for Democratization and Sustainable Development in Morocco: An NGO Assessment*, USAID Document PN-ABY-781 (Washington, D.C.: USAID, 1996), iv).
- ³⁰ The Chemonics report argued: “One strategy is to encourage NGOs not tied to radical opposition groups to provide local services, by granting NGOs greater freedom and more access to local decision making. In the political space thus provided, NGOs can expand memberships, fields of activities, and access to decision-making. . . . Negotiated transitions to democracy will begin . . . as government elites and emerging civil society leadership gradually increase interaction and build trust” (Chemonics International for U.S. Agency for International Development, *Final Report*, B-1–B-2).

- ³¹ As a USAID paper on assistance to service NGOs in Egypt explained, “While it is more simple to conclude that a transformation of [Egypt’s] prevailing political culture is absolutely dependent on the prevailing political system and its practices, . . . one can also argue that changes in the political culture can happen at the society level, prior to its happening at the political leadership level. Through information exchange, exposure to other countries’ and groups’ experiences, and the provision of channels of participation—albeit local in nature—this can have a powerful effect on creating empowerment in communities that might induce a broader dynamic for change” (USAID Egypt, “The NGO Service Center Activity,” unpublished paper, 2002, 1).
- ³² As USAID’s strategic plan for Egypt for 1996 explained, “In addition to the constraints formally posed by restrictive laws, . . . civil society effectiveness is limited by . . . lack of vision, and weak organizational skills Many civil society organizations . . . lack administrative capabilities and techniques that could increase their effectiveness in voicing their special interests in the public arena and in carrying on a dialogue with government decision-makers” (USAID Egypt, *Strategic Plan: 1996–2001*, USAID Document PN-ACA-849 (Cairo: USAID Egypt, 1996), 30).
- ³³ For an example of a standard civil society technical assistance program, see America’s Development Foundation for USAID, *Final Report: Civil Society Capacity Building Program—West Bank and Gaza Strip*, USAID Cooperative Agreement 294-A-00-00-00053-00 (Alexandria, Va.: America’s Development Foundation, 2002).
- ³⁴ John P. Mason and Iman Youssef, *Final Evaluation: Egypt Private and Voluntary Development Project*, USAID Cooperative Agreement 263-A-00-92-00017-00 (Arlington, Va.: Development Associates, Inc., 1999), 8.
- ³⁵ For an illustrative example of recommendations for advocacy training for prodemocracy groups, see USAID Morocco, *Addendum to the USAID Morocco Country Strategy Plan: 1999–2005*, USAID Document PD-ABT-383 (Rabat: USAID Morocco, 2000), 29–38.
- ³⁶ As the Development Associates report on the Egyptian private voluntary organization development project noted, “The Ministry of Insurance and Social Affairs played a supportive role in approving [NGOs] for participation in the . . . project and in recommending prospective grantees” (Mason and Youssef, *Final Evaluation*, p. “e”).
- ³⁷ For example, new USAID guidelines issued on January 8, 2004, require all Palestinian NGOs receiving U.S. funding to sign a pledge “not to promote or engage in violence, terrorism, bigotry, or the destruction of any state.” Nearly 100 Palestinian NGOs have refused to sign the pledge.

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