

**WORKING**  
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**Middle East  
Series**

**IS GRADUALISM  
POSSIBLE?**

**Choosing a  
Strategy for  
Promoting  
Democracy in  
the Middle East**

*Thomas Carothers*



CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT  
*for International Peace*

**Democracy and Rule  
of Law Project**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

As part of the changed U.S. geostrategic outlook arising from the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks against the United States, the Bush administration is giving greatly heightened attention to the issue of promoting democracy in the Middle East. Although a policy of coercive regime change has been applied in Iraq, in most of the region the administration is pursuing a more gradualist model of political change that emphasizes diplomatic pressure and democracy-related aid.

Within this growing domain of gradualist pro-democratic policies and programs, three competing strategies are being tried: promoting economic reform as a precursor to political reform; indirectly promoting democracy through efforts focused on reforming governance and expanding civil society; and directly promoting democracy through efforts to broaden and deepen democratic political contestation. Each of these strategies has its own mix of significant advantages and disadvantages.

Although these three strategies could in principle be integrated into one overarching strategy, in practice, there is little consensus among U.S. policy makers as to their relative value. So far, the main U.S. emphasis has been on promoting economic reform though there is a recent upsurge in U.S. efforts to foster good governance and independent civil society. A major choice facing the Bush administration is whether to commit significant resources and political capital to the core issue of democratic political contestation.



## INTRODUCTION

THE SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, TERRORIST ATTACKS against the United States have led George W. Bush's administration to reassess America's traditional acceptance of Arab autocracies as useful security partners and to engage more seriously than any previous administration with the issue of whether and how the United States can promote democracy in the Middle East. The administration's post-September 11 declarations and actions on democracy in the region have thus far followed two distinct lines, one hard and one soft. The hard line aims at regime change in countries with governments hostile to the United States. The ouster of Saddam Hussein was primarily motivated by U.S. security concerns, but some administration officials and policy experts close to the administration were also attracted by the chance to try to create democracy in Iraq and to stimulate the destabilization (and, some people hope, the democratization) of other hostile regimes in the region, notably in Iran and Syria. The soft line is directed at the Arab governments with which the United States has friendly relations. It seeks to put the United States in the role of encouraging and facilitating gradual transitions to democracy in the region, through a combination of increased aid, especially democracy-related aid, and diplomatic engagement.

As the United States attempts to develop this soft line into a workable strategy of fostering democratic change throughout the region, it confronts two major complications with regard to its own role (leaving aside the enormous difficulties inherent in trying to promote democracy in a region rife with so many formidable obstacles to such change). First, the United States lacks credibility as a pro-democratic actor. This stems from America's long-standing support for nondemocratic regimes in the region, Arab perceptions that Washington undervalues the rights of Palestinians, and various other factors.<sup>1</sup> Second, there is the stubborn fact that the friendly Arab autocrats serve significant American economic and security interests, and it is not clear that more democratic successor regimes would be as helpful to the United States. Beyond these two issues, however, lies a critical question that has received inadequate attention: What would a gradualist strategy for democracy in the Arab world actually be in practice?

To date, the soft line lacks definition. As State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) officials have searched for ways to step up U.S. efforts to promote democracy in the Middle East, they have tended to put forward many ideas. All of these various ideas are appealing to one group or another in the U.S. policy community but do not necessarily add up to a coherent strategy—promoting women's rights, bolstering civil society, revitalizing education, fostering good governance, strengthening the rule of law, supporting decentralization, and so forth.

Looking at this growing domain of activities and initiatives, it is possible to see several competing strategies at work. This paper identifies and assesses these diverse strategies, examines the question of whether they constitute a coherent whole, and identifies the key choice concerning strategy that lies directly ahead.

### POLITICAL BLOCKAGE

Before discussing the contending strategies, it is useful to review the basic political situation in the region. In a small number of Arab states—Libya, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates—the level of political repression is so high that there are few entry points available to the United States for programs to promote democracy. The United States could exert diplomatic pressure for political reform in these countries, but unless Washington were to back up such actions with much more substantial forms of coercive leverage, these dictatorial regimes would be unlikely to loosen their hold on power. An exception might be Saudi Arabia, where the United States, due to its long-standing close ties to the Saudi government, might have at hand some levers of real influence to encourage progress on the recently announced program of political reforms.

A majority of Arab states—Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, and Yemen—are not outright dictatorships but semiauthoritarian regimes or, as some analysts prefer, partially liberalized autocracies. U.S. (and European) efforts to promote democracy are primarily directed toward these countries. Their governments allow a certain amount of political space. In some of them, opposition parties are legal and compete in legislative elections, and independent civil society groups are allowed to exist. In others (i.e., most of the Gulf states), neither parties nor independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are allowed, but citizens nevertheless enjoy a limited degree of political freedom and there is some open political competition. In all of these semiauthoritarian countries, the central power holders—whether they are presidents or monarchs—remain outside the directly contested political space.

As Daniel Brumberg has argued in a previous paper in this series, the political liberalization these regimes have pursued is quite different from democratization, and it would be a mistake to assume any easy or natural path from liberalization to democratization.<sup>2</sup> The regimes have engaged in limited, often sporadic political liberalization to relieve accumulated domestic political pressure and gain some reformist legitimacy. The reforms are a means of preserving their hold on power, not of creating democracy. That is to say, the reforms are not aimed at creating a process that would lead to the leaders eventually having to risk giving up power to some elected alternative. As Brumberg notes, liberalization in the Arab world tends to go a certain distance and then get stuck, resulting in the widespread regional syndrome of political blockage, or what he calls the trap of liberalized autocracy.

The state of the political opposition in these countries is a key factor in the partial liberalization trap. In most of these countries, the opposition falls into two parts. One part, by far the weaker of the two, consists of political activists associated with nationalist or secular traditions who advocate some liberal political ideas and whom Westerners usually call “the democrats.” In most of these countries, this part of the opposition is politically weak, is unable to unite in a single party or coalition, lacks a strong base among everyday citizens, and is constantly in danger of being co-opted by the government. The stronger part of the opposition consists of Islamist forces, of diverse degrees of fundamentalism or radicalism. They tend to be well organized, dedicated, and have a significant base in the citizenry due to their network of social programs in education, health, and other services.

The willingness of many of the Islamist forces to accept a democratic political framework as something more than just a means of gaining power is uncertain at best. Their ultimate goals are even more uncertain. Arab governments use this fact—sometimes legitimately, sometimes cynically—as a justification for not further opening the political system. In turn, the continued

exclusion of many Islamist groups from the inner circles of power fuels their own political radicalism, creating a negative cycle of political action and reaction that only reinforces the basic political blockage.

A few of these semiauthoritarian Arab regimes, such as Bahrain, Morocco, and perhaps Yemen, are still moving ahead with liberalizing reforms. A few others, including Egypt and Jordan, have recently been drifting backward, though in the wake of the Iraq war they and others are making some new reformist signals, seeking to gain favor in Washington. Yet all are basically stuck in a political state several steps away from authoritarianism but still very far from democracy.

## THE GRADUALIST SCENARIO

At the core of any search for a strategy to promote democracy in the Middle East is the question of what transition scenario the promoters envisage. How are these semiauthoritarian regimes actually supposed to democratize? Despite all the talk in the past year about Washington's newfound desire to foster democracy in the region, there has been notably little real discussion of what the process of going from point A (blocked semiauthoritarianism) to point B (democracy) might look like.

Experience from other regions indicates that, very generally speaking, there are two paths from authoritarianism (or semiauthoritarianism) to democracy. On one path, a nondemocratic country may undergo a controlled, top-down process of iterative political change in which political space and contestation are progressively broadened to the point that democracy is achieved. On the other path, the accumulated failures of an authoritarian or semiauthoritarian regime may provoke a loss of political legitimacy, which leads to the regime being driven out of power (by spontaneous public demonstrations, an organized opposition movement, or disenchanted political elites) and to an attempt to create a democratic system to take the place of the discredited, ousted regime.

Given that many Western policy makers worry about what political forces might take over if Arab governments experienced regime collapse, the gradualist scenario is undoubtedly much more attractive to most. Presumably, it is the overall goal of most Western efforts to promote democracy in the region. It must be noted, however, that the collapse scenario has been much more common around the world than the gradual success scenario. Only a handful of countries—including Chile, Mexico, Taiwan, and South Korea (though in South Korea there was much assertive citizen activism along the way)—have managed to move to democracy through a top-down, gradualist process of political opening, in which the dictatorial regime gradually changed its stripes and left power through an electoral process. But dozens of countries in Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, the former Soviet Union, and Sub-Saharan Africa have seen their attempted democratic transitions of the past 20 years initially defined by a crash—the crash of the incumbent dictatorial regime.

One principal characteristic of the successful gradualist transitions was that they were built on economic success. In each country, growth and development created an independent business sector and a growing middle class with an interest in and capacity to fight for a greater political say in their own affairs. The economic success also tended to moderate the opposition and undercut extremist alternatives, thereby giving the ruling elite the self-confidence to keep moving toward greater political openness.

## IS GRADUALISM POSSIBLE?

Another critical feature of these transitions is that the process of political change was eminently political. That is to say, it did not consist only or even primarily of the step-by-step expansion of independent civil society and the technocratic reform of governing institutions. Elections were crucial to the process—not just local or legislative elections but also elections in which opposition parties were allowed to compete for the central positions of political power. In Mexico and Taiwan, elections were for years manipulated in favor of the ruling party. But over time, the elections were made fairer, and when the opposition eventually managed to win, the rulers respected the results.

On the basis of the record of experience, it is evident that though the gradualist scenario is clearly more attractive to most Western policy makers, it is difficult and has been only rarely achieved around the world. Nevertheless, the most likely alternative in the Arab world—semiauthoritarian regimes continuing to remain politically stagnant, breeding increasingly radical and empowered opposition forces, leading to eventual regime collapse and ensuing political turbulence—is unattractive enough that a gradualist strategy of promoting Arab democracy needs to be clearly identified and seriously pursued. So far, it appears that the U.S. government's efforts to promote gradualist transitions in the Arab world fit into one of three different strategies: focusing on economic reform, indirectly promoting democracy, or directly supporting democracy.

## FOCUSING ON ECONOMIC REFORM

Some U.S. officials—especially specialists who have worked in or followed the region for many years—are wary of more direct political approaches and instead recommend an “economics-first” strategy. In this view, the core driver of positive political change is most likely to be economic progress. Such progress would help a truly independent private sector emerge and shrink the corporatist states that predominate in the region, which would in turn bolster a more independent, vital civil society and media as well as competing political elites less vulnerable to co-optation and less prone to base their appeal on the widespread sense of societal failure and frustration. Greater wealth would also spawn a larger, more independent middle class with access to more travel and education and a wider range of political ideas.

In this view, therefore, the United States should concentrate its pro-reform energies in the economic domain. The prescribed economic reforms are the standard market-oriented measures that the United States and the international financial institutions advocate around the world—more privatization, fiscal reform, banking reform, tax reform, investment liberalization, and so forth. In this vein, the Bush administration has recently decided to make a major push on free trade agreements with Arab governments and has articulated the vision of a U.S.–Middle East free trade area.

The economics-first approach has several significant points of attraction. The underlying rationale is solid—there is no question that economic success does tend to make democratization more likely. Moreover, such an approach does not put the United States in the awkward, and usually resented, position of having to exert political pressure on friendly Arab governments. Economic reform is a message that is somewhat more palatable to Arab elites, and it is a subject on which the United States, due to its own economic success, has some credibility—in contrast to the serious problem of credibility plaguing U.S. declarations regarding democracy. At the same time, it should be noted that Western pushes for structural adjustment and other neoliberal reforms have been controversial and unpopular in some Arab societies (especially in those without a cushion of oil production).

Yet this approach has several serious potential limitations beyond the frequent public unpopularity of the recommended economic reform measures. The United States has already been pressing many Arab governments for years or even decades (e.g., Egypt) to carry out market reforms, with only very limited success. Some governments have made progress on macroeconomic reforms, such as reducing fiscal deficits, but almost all have fallen badly short on the necessary institutional and microeconomic reforms, such as banking reform, tax reform, and modernization of the state.

Carrying out such reforms would entail a major reshaping of the way Arab states operate and their relationship with their own societies. These states have failed to follow through on such reforms out of a lack of will to confront deeply entrenched, politically protected, antireformist interests and a lack of desire to give up the political levers of control that statist economic structures provide. Although the idea that economic change should proceed political change is very appealing, the sticky fact remains that the lack of political reform and political accountability is precisely what undermines efforts to motivate Arab governments to undertake far-reaching economic structural reform.

Moreover, even if Arab governments actually implemented the full set of recommended market reforms, there is no guarantee that high growth and sustainable economic development would result. Many countries throughout the developing world have attempted to achieve the East Asian–style economic breakthroughs (which themselves were not really built on the kind of market reform prescriptions contained in the “Washington Consensus”). Very few have succeeded. South America is a sobering example of a region that in the 1990s accepted and implemented a significant number of the recommended market reforms yet has experienced only modest growth and is now facing political turmoil and decay rather than democratic consolidation.

Even if Arab governments actually did get serious about market reforms and those reforms led to growth and development, the positive political payoff might be at least decades away. In East Asia, the link between economic success and political change took 20 to 30 years to develop. Many observers concerned about the political viability of stagnant Arab regimes doubt that, given the rising demographic pressures and consequent political pressures, these regimes will be able to hold out that long.

## **INDIRECTLY PROMOTING DEMOCRACY**

The second identifiable U.S. strategy for stimulating gradualist Arab political transitions consists of promoting better governance and other state reforms as well as expanded and strengthened civil societies. These types of activities can be considered indirect promotion of democracy because they do not tackle the core processes of political contestation. Proponents of this strategy are primarily found in USAID (which began sponsoring such efforts in the region in the mid-1990s), the State Department (in the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor and the democracy promotion group in the Bureau for Near East Affairs), and some of the democracy promotion organizations that operate with U.S. funding. The main tool of this approach is assistance for reforming governance and developing civil society (typically sponsored by USAID and now also by the State Department under its new Middle East Partnership Initiative. U.S. policy makers have increasingly tried in the past year or two to complement such aid with diplomatic pressure on Arab governments to take seriously the challenge of improving governance and to give a real place to an independent civil society.

## IS GRADUALISM POSSIBLE?

The most common types of work on reforming governance and the state include

- strengthening the rule of law, especially through judicial reform;
- strengthening parliaments, through efforts to build better internal capacity and bolster constituency relations;
- reducing state corruption, through anticorruption commissions, legislative rationalization, and advocacy campaigns; and
- promoting decentralization, through training for local government officials and legislative actions to increase the authority of local governments.

Programs to expand civil society often consist of

- funding for NGOs devoted to public-interest advocacy, such as on human rights, the environment, and anticorruption;
- support for women's rights organizations;
- strengthening independent media; and
- underwriting formal and informal efforts to advance democratic civic education.

Such indirect aid for democracy in the Arab world has several attractive aspects. All of these types of work unquestionably touch on areas of Arab sociopolitical life that need improvement. They are a collection of what Western aid providers and policy makers tend to consider “good things” that they believe should have relevance in every region of the world. Moreover, these sorts of activities often find a narrow but real response in the host societies, heartening democracy promoters and persuading them of the value of their work. Even if there is blockage at the central political level, there may well be, for example, some judges interested in trying to improve judicial efficiency, some decent local politicians eager to learn how to better serve their constituents, or some NGO leaders with admirable talents and courage. And the democracy aid community has a well-established capacity to deliver this kind of assistance. If a U.S. embassy or USAID mission in a country wants to develop a broad portfolio of indirect aid for democracy, the mechanisms exist to do so fairly easily and quickly, provided sufficient funds are made available.

A further attraction—at least from the point of view of U.S. officials wary of stepping on the toes of friendly Arab governments—is that most of these kinds of democracy programs can be initiated (though not necessarily successfully completed) without irritating host governments. Most Arab governments are willing to tolerate these sorts of activities, within limits. They may hope that the governance programs will render the state more capable of solving citizens' problems and burnish their own legitimacy as reformist regimes, even as they drag their feet on the necessary institutional changes. They are less likely to be fond of the civil society activities but tend to put up with them, as long as such efforts are not too assertive, do not help Islamist groups, and generally give host governments some control over which groups receive the foreign support.

The nonthreatening nature of indirect aid for democracy is attractive to U.S. officials but also a sign of the central weakness of this approach. Valuable though this aid can be, there is a danger that U.S. policy makers eager to show that the United States is taking seriously the challenge of Middle Eastern democracy will expect too much from it. Efforts to improve governance and to broaden civil society work best in countries that are actually attempting to democratize—that is,

where an authoritarian government has been replaced with a new elected government or else has made a decision to move seriously toward a real democratic process. These efforts are designed as ways to *further* democratic consolidation, *not* as fundamental drivers of democratization itself. They can certainly be attempted in countries engaged in limited political liberalization. But in such contexts, they are likely to fit within the boundaries of that political arrangement, perhaps widening the boundaries a bit but not altering the basic political equation. They may in fact help strengthen semiauthoritarian regimes by giving frustrated citizens the impression that important reforms are taking place, thereby bleeding off a certain amount of accumulated internal pressure for change.

To put it more bluntly, adaptable, long-surviving semiauthoritarian regimes such as those in Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco are masters at absorbing liberalizing reforms without really changing their core political structures. In such contexts, it is very possible that outside democracy promoters can work for years helping to increase judicial efficiency, augment the capacities of parliamentarians, train local mayors, nourish civic advocacy, foster greater women's rights, and promote more democratic civic education without contributing to a basic change of regime type.

## **DIRECTLY SUPPORTING DEMOCRACY**

Although limited liberalization in the Arab world has thus far stopped well short of real democratization, a bridge between liberalization and democratization is not inconceivable. Building such a bridge, however, requires governments to take some important steps:

- moving toward broad, consistent respect for political and civil rights;
- opening up the domain of political contestation to all political forces that agree to play by the democratic rules of the game;
- obeying the rules of fair political contestation (above all, ceasing to rig or otherwise manipulate elections); and
- reducing the reserved political space (i.e., expanding the reach of political contestation to include the country's central political power holders).

If most or all of these bridge-building steps are being taken, a country is moving from liberalization to democracy. The third direct approach to promoting gradualist democratic transitions in the Arab world seeks to use a combination of aid for democracy and diplomatic engagement to push Arab governments to begin building such a bridge in their own societies. Only a relatively small number of persons within the U.S. policy community advocate such an approach, primarily persons within the democracy aid organizations (above all, within the two political party institutes). And only fairly small-scale activities have yet been supported in this vein, though at least in two countries, Morocco and Yemen, they have been under way for some time and arguably with at least some success.

The central element of the strategy for directly supporting democracy is to encourage and pressure Arab governments to strengthen and gradually broaden the processes of organized political contestation in their countries. The most immediate focus of such efforts is normally elections—undertaking activities to make elections more meaningful. Full-fledged support in this regard would consist of various interrelated measures:

## IS GRADUALISM POSSIBLE?

- programs to strengthen political parties—to help parties and politicians develop basic organizational skills, improve their constituency relations, improve coalition building, and the like; and where opposition political parties are not yet permitted (as in the Gulf states), urging the government through diplomacy to take the step of allowing the formation of parties;
- aid to strengthen election administration entities and push hard on governments to give such entities greater political independence;
- support for domestic and international election monitoring (resistance to election monitoring is more widespread in the Arab world than any other region and remains an area of considerable potential development);
- aid for civic groups that work to improve electoral processes by organizing candidate forums, monitoring campaign fairness, educating citizens about elections, and promoting voter turnout;
- activities to increase women's political participation;
- giving high-level, more consistent diplomatic attention to Arab elections, including real criticism when elections fall short and a reduction of ritualistic praise for problematic electoral processes; and
- respecting the outcomes of elections, even if they are not to Washington's liking.

The United States could complement this heightened attention to elections with a broader, high-level push to encourage or pressure Arab leaders to give great respect to human rights, especially such core political and civil rights as freedom of speech, freedom of association, and due process. Many Arabs have the impression that the U.S. government pushes hard on human rights when persons connected to the United States are mistreated but remains silent when Islamists or other nonfriends of the United States suffer persecution. Correcting this double standard would send an important positive signal to Arab governments and societies.

Another broader element of assistance in strengthening the processes of political contestation could be a more serious effort by the United States to encourage Arab governments to be more politically inclusive, above all with regard to Islamists. Policies vary in the region concerning the participation of Islamist parties or organizations in formal political life, but everywhere the issue is crucial to the broader challenge of widening political contestation. The U.S. government could have much more extensive, regularized contacts with Islamists, both to get to know them better and to help them understand U.S. policy more accurately.

Opening up such contacts would not mean that the United States is approving of or embracing those groups, merely that it is acknowledging that they are a part of the political landscape. And this would send an important message of inclusiveness to Arab governments. In Egypt, for example, the current U.S. approach of having only minimal official contact with the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups reinforces the Egyptian government's policy of trying to exclude them from political life.

The strategy of directly supporting democracy is based on the idea that if the existing weak, limited processes of political contestation can be gradually infused with the principles of fairness, inclusion, honesty, and openness, governments will begin to give more real authority and power to elected parliaments and local governments and citizens will begin to put some stock in political processes and related institutions. This in turn could encourage Arab leaders over time to reduce the political power they keep outside the processes of political contestation (i.e., their own executive power) and eventually to contemplate the actual democratization of the central state.

The main attraction of the direct democracy strategy is precisely its directness—it attempts to tackle the core question of how Arab states might actually move from limited liberalization to actual democratization, something the other two strategies do not really address. Of course, even if the United States did decide to commit itself to this more activist approach, its role would still just be that of an advocate and enabler. Direct though it may be, this strategy primarily consists of pushing Arab governments to face the potential dangers of indefinite partial liberalization, identifying a road out, and urging and helping them to move along that road.

The potential payoff of this third strategy is high, but so too are its potential drawbacks and risks. If the United States actually pushed Arab leaders hard to respect human rights, be more politically inclusive, and subject their own rule to the public's choice, it would produce paroxysms of resentment among political elites in the region and alienate longtime friends. It could jeopardize the beneficial cooperation that Washington receives from friendly Arab autocrats on antiterrorist matters, on efforts to resolve the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, and on supplying oil. Some of this resentment might be mitigated by the fact that a stepped-up set of initiatives to directly aid democracy would likely be carried out by United States–based NGOs and would therefore be at least one step removed from direct U.S. governmental action. Yet even these NGOs are frequently viewed in aid-receiving countries as extensions of the U.S. government. And if such aid is to be effective, it must be backed up with significant U.S. government jawboning and pressure.

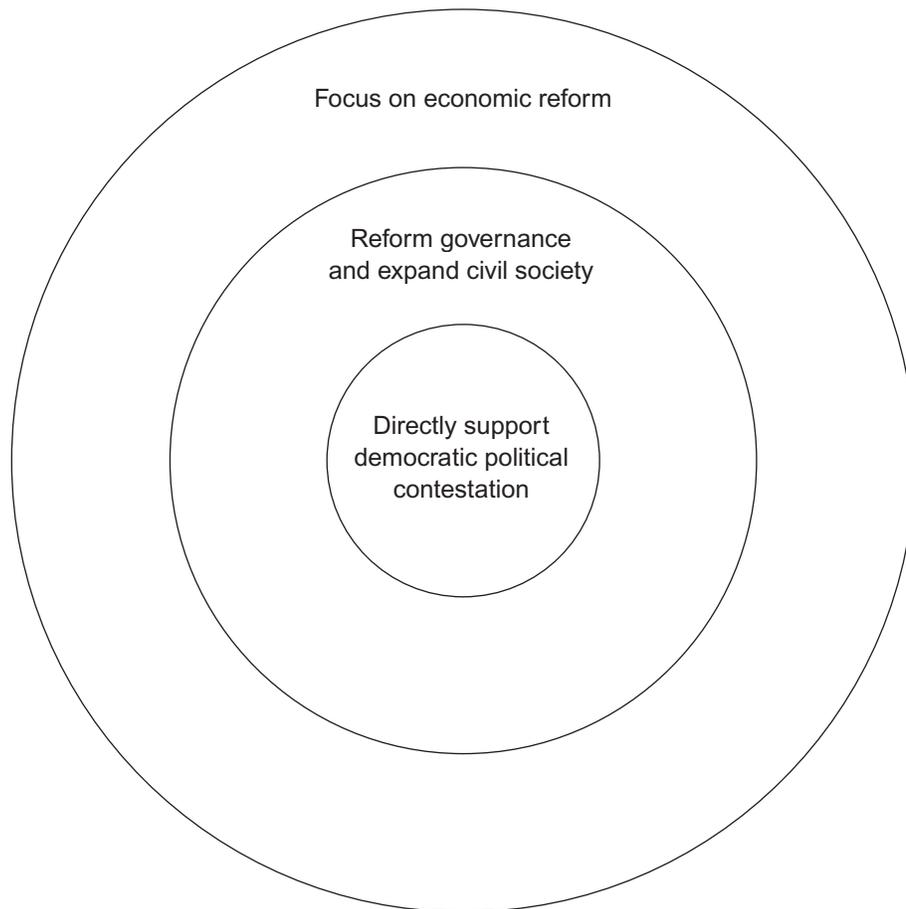
And of course the third strategy runs squarely into the deeper doubts of many in the U.S. government and elsewhere about both the possibility and desirability of any real democratization in the Middle East. Might not genuinely open political processes bring to power Islamists who would disavow democracy once in power and pursue policies inimical to U.S. security and economic interests? This question has of course animated debates over Arab political futures for many years, and the various arguments and counterarguments have been much rehearsed.

The core argument for the direct democracy strategy is that a gradual but purposeful expansion of the political space and contestation could strengthen moderates and weaken extremists on both sides of the political divide in Arab countries. According to this argument, even though this gradual process would be risky and difficult, such a frontal approach to promoting democracy in the Arab world would be less risky and problematic in the long run than letting countries continue to stagnate and fester politically.

## THE REAL CHOICE

In theory, the three different strategies to encourage gradualist transitions to democracy in the Arab world can be seen as three parts of one integrated strategy. Figure 1 depicts one way to conceive of the three strategies as forming a larger whole—as three concentric circles with economic reform on the outside, indirect promotion of democracy in the middle, and direct support for democratic political contestation at the center. In any given Arab country, the United States could simultaneously promote economic reform, increase efforts to indirectly aid democracy by assisting in reforming the state and expanding civil society, and initiate efforts to directly strengthen and broaden the established processes of political contestation.

Figure 1. Three Strategies of Promoting Gradualist Democratic Transitions



The unfolding pattern of U.S. efforts to promote democracy in the Middle East since the early 1990s might in fact be seen as precisely the achievement of such a threefold synthesis. In the early 1990s, when the U.S. government first gave serious thought to how it might promote positive political change in the Arab world, the economic reform strategy gained favor. Then, in the second half of the decade, the United States began funding a small but growing number of programs to improve governance and foster civil society. The indirect democracy approach got a big boost after September 11, 2001—the new U.S. interest in promoting democracy in the Arab world was translated into ambitious plans to significantly increase programs to indirectly aid democracy, with the Middle East Partnership Initiative as the flagship. And then, very gradually, the U.S. government has started to support some programs that directly promote democracy—only a trickle in the 1990s but more in the post–September 11 context.

In principle, the three different approaches can indeed function as mutually reinforcing parts of one integrated strategy. In practice, however, quickly smoothing over the differences among them and insisting that U.S. policy entails pursuing all three at once gives the impression of a consensus that in fact has not yet been achieved. U.S. policy with regard to promoting democracy in the Arab world is in flux. The government is giving greater, more serious attention to the question than at any previous time. But within the many parts of the government that concern themselves with the

issue—the White House, State Department, USAID, the Defense Department, and the intelligence agencies—there are many different opinions and ideas and little real consensus.

Advocates of the economic reform approach are often skeptical of the whole idea that the United States should promote democracy in the Arab world. Economic reform is their choice because it puts the day of political reckoning comfortably far off in the future and seems the least risky approach. They are usually willing to tolerate indirect democracy aid programs because they figure that such activities are unlikely to make much difference and are also relatively low risk. But they are skeptical of or actively opposed to direct efforts to promote democracy. Enthusiasts of the indirect approach accept that economic reform can have complementary value but warn against relying solely on it. They are often wary of the direct approach but are usually not opposed to at least giving it a try in limited circumstances. Advocates of the direct approach are sometimes doubtful about the economic route, seeing it as a cover for little real engagement with democracy. But they are usually favorable to indirect programs, viewing them as a natural partner of direct methods.

The crucial line is that between the direct approach and the two others. The U.S. government will undoubtedly keep trying to press for economic reform in the Arab world. And the new wave of indirect democracy aid efforts will certainly go forward. Therefore, the key question of strategy is whether the United States will decide to try to mount a major effort to support a strategy to directly promote democracy throughout the region or instead stick to the economic reform and indirect approaches.

Of course, the strategy of directly promoting democracy is not an undifferentiated tool to be applied (or not) in every country. Some countries are more ripe for such efforts than others, and direct methods may take somewhat different forms depending on the context. Morocco and Yemen, for example, have made some real progress with multiparty competition (in part with the assistance of U.S. and European elections and party programs) and could clearly benefit from continued, and indeed expanded, work in this domain. Algeria, Egypt, and Jordan are potential candidates for such efforts, though the sensitivities of their ruling elites about issues of political inclusion and rights are extremely high. A few of the small Gulf states, notably Bahrain and Qatar, may present some opportunities in this domain, though they are still grappling with starting-point issues such as whether to allow political parties and independent civic groups.

For the U.S. government to genuinely commit itself to direct methods of promoting democracy would mean a significant change of course—away from decades of support for political stasis and from deep attachments to particular rulers. It would mean taking significant political risks and expending real political capital that up to now has been used in the service of economic and security interests. This is the key choice facing the United States with regard to promoting democracy in the Middle East. Until it is clearly decided one way or the other, the growing number of U.S. policy statements and aid initiatives in the domain will lack essential strategic definition.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Marina Ottaway, *Promoting Democracy in the Middle East: The Problem of U.S. Credibility*, Carnegie Endowment Working Paper 35 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003).
- <sup>2</sup> Daniel Brumberg, *Liberalization Versus Democracy: Understanding Arab Political Reform*, Carnegie Endowment Working Paper 37 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003).

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