"The U.S. Approach to Promoting Democracy in the Middle East"

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Democracy promotion has deep roots in the U.S. government, beginning perhaps with Thomas Jefferson. In 1793, with the French Revolution descending into chaos and brutality, Jefferson wrote, “Rather than [the revolution] should have failed, I would have seen half the earth desolated.” He continued, “Were there but an Adam and an Eve left in every country, and left free, it would be better than as it now is.”¹ For all his enthusiasm, Jefferson was not alone in these sentiments; few values have deeper roots or are more widely held in America than faith in democracy. Nevertheless, although support for democracy has found frequent refrain in presidential rhetoric, democracy promotion as a central element of U.S. policy in the Middle East is relatively new. According to Ken Wollack, the president of the National Democratic Institute, “A turning point for U.S. policy…came during the 1980s when an important lesson was learned about political transformation in countries like Chile, Nicaragua, and the Philippines…those political forces on the far left and far right enjoyed a mutually reinforcing relationship, marginalizing the democratic center.”² Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Bill Clinton spoke out forcefully in favor of democracy; nevertheless, until the administration of George W. Bush, democracy promotion was never at the core of U.S. policy toward the Middle East.

Nevertheless, President Bush’s embrace of democracy promotion did not ensconce it as a pillar of U.S. policy in the region—far from it. Democracy promotion became conflated with other policies pursued during the Bush administration—chiefly the war in Iraq and the U.S.-led campaign to counter terrorism globally—which by 2008 had polarized the American policy community. Analysts on the left panned democracy promotion under President Bush as overly militarized, improperly entangled with counterterrorism efforts, and inconsistent. Marina Ottaway of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace went so far as to declare that “democracy promotion in the Middle East has led to no positive results.”³

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Despite such views, and regardless of one’s position on the Iraq war or international counterterrorism efforts, there is evidence that U.S. democracy promotion efforts from 2001 to 2009 yielded important results. According to Wollack, “Until 2003, President Bush’s use of the bully pulpit, particularly in the Middle East, had provided an important measure of political space for reformers….In fact, democratic norms and freedoms increasingly became part of the public discourse and demands in the region. And even where democratic progress was scarce, the language of debate was changing, and this in itself is not a small achievement.” In 2001, Freedom House listed fourteen countries in the Middle East and North Africa region as “not free” and three as “partly free.” In 2008, those figures were eleven and six, respectively.4

Nevertheless, at the advent of the Obama administration, it seemed that the deep aversion on the political left to President Bush’s overall approach to the Middle East might spell the end of Washington’s democracy promotion efforts in the region. Critics of the Bush administration accused it of inappropriately mixing democracy promotion with unrelated goals, which in the words of one analyst “sent a message that the democracy and freedom agenda was first and foremost self-interested and aimed at transforming societies for America’s benefit.”5 But these observers themselves tended to conflate their critiques of the administration’s democracy promotion efforts with their dissatisfaction with other U.S. policies in the region. The same analyst, for example, said that investing greater energy in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations was a “strategic necessity” for improving Washington’s democratization efforts. He counseled that “the opportunities for advancing democracy in the Middle East appear much more limited than when [President Obama’s] predecessor entered office.”6

It is nor surprising, therefore, that President Obama adopted a markedly more modest approach to democratization than that pursued by his predecessor. Asked whether she would raise human rights in meetings with Chinese leaders in Beijing in February 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asserted that “our pressing on [human rights] can’t interfere with the global economic crisis, the global climate change crisis, and the security crisis.”7 President Obama mentioned democracy as the fifth of seven issues for discussion in his June 4, 2009, speech in Cairo, but was criticized for appearing to be indifferent to opposition protests in Iran just days later. Remarks on the subject by Vice President Joe Biden at the Munich Security Conference on February 7, 2009, provide a clear sense of the Obama administration’s approach to the issue of democracy promotion. He said, “Our administration has set an ambitious goal…to advance democracy not through the imposition of force from the outside, but by working with

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6 Ibid.
moderates in government and civil society to build those institutions that will protect that freedom.”

Biden’s statement foreshadowed the main lines of the Obama approach—repudiating the Bush administration’s democracy policy as characterized by the Obama team and focusing on “bottom-up” civil society and institution-building efforts rather than top-down pressure on regional governments. Certain elements of the Obama approach garnered widespread support, such as its emphasis on internet freedom and access to technology; others, such as downplaying U.S. leadership on democracy, an emphasis on governance rather than democracy programming, and a narrow focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a means to address regional issues, attracted criticism.

With time, the Obama administration has placed a heavier rhetorical emphasis on democracy. This may be either the result of a diminishing impulse as time passed to establish policy positions that are clearly distinct from those of the Bush administration or of criticism of the sort that followed the perplexing U.S. response to the 2009 protests in Iran. President Obama’s address to the UN General Assembly in September 2010 made a strong case for democracy promotion. He asserted that “those who defend [universal] values for their people have been our closest friends and allies, while those who have denied those rights—whether terrorist groups or tyrannical governments—have chosen to be our adversaries.” He further stated, “Democracy, more than any other form of government, delivers for our citizens. And that truth will only grow stronger in a world where the borders between nations are blurred.”

In a January 2011 speech in Doha, Qatar, before Arab leaders, Secretary Clinton called upon countries in the region to “make the political reforms that will create the space young people are demanding, to participate in public affairs and have a meaningful role in the decisions that shape their lives.”

In addition, the administration’s 2011 budget included increases for democracy funding in the Middle East.

But the extent to which there has been a real shift is uncertain, and has been called further into question by the Obama administration’s slow and uneven response to opposition protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and elsewhere. The U.S. budget for “democracy” programming in the Middle East is growing, but remains heavily focused on “governance” issues rather than political change. And controversial changes made to the way that aid is delivered have remained in place, such as the requirement that all U.S. democracy funding in Egypt be channeled to NGOs approved by the (former) Egyptian government. Even the levels of funding seem to be influenced by a desire to improve relations with regional regimes.

The Project on Middle East Democracy observed the following regarding U.S. aid to Egypt:

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The administration has suggested that Egypt lacks the capacity to properly absorb the level of
democracy and governance funding allocated in FY06 through FY08, motivating the sharp
decrease since FY09. If West Bank and Gaza and Lebanon—each with populations of less than 5
million—can properly absorb $41.5 million and $23.2 million respectively in democracy and
governance funding, then it appears unlikely that Egypt—a country of 80 million people with
more than 15,000 NGOs—cannot absorb more than $25 million in such funding.11

Likewise, President Obama’s UN speech and Secretary Clinton’s Doha speech, while stirring, mentioned
neither specific countries nor specific actions that the United States wished to see regional leaders take.
While the rhetoric became more forceful, the essential approach—a heavy focus on governance and
bottom-up efforts, with relatively little public pressure on governments—remained in place at the cusp of
the 2011 uprisings. Those revolutions will certainly bring about a reevaluation of the U.S. approach to
democracy promotion in the Middle East and beyond, but it is too soon to tell how they will ultimately
shape U.S. policy. Washington will face competing pressures to push for political reforms on the one
hand and shore up its regional alliances on the other. The Obama administration and its successors will
need to determine whether they see these goals as complementary or mutually exclusive.

Democracy Promotion and U.S. Interests

There are lingering notions in Washington that the United States must choose between promoting
stability and promoting democracy in the Middle East or, put another way, that the United States can
either advance its interests or uphold its values, but not both. This is an idea that has now been rejected,
at least in theory if not always in practice, by both the Bush and Obama administrations. Secretary of
State Condoleezza Rice famously debunked the notion that the United States could purchase stability at
the expense of democracy in a 2005 speech at the American University of Cairo in which she delineated a
number of specific political reforms the United States was pressing the Egyptian government to make.
Then-candidate Obama, in a 2007 presidential debate, echoed Secretary Rice when he said that human
rights and national security “are not contradictory…they are complementary.”12

Recent events in the Middle East have demonstrated that the apparent stability offered by dictatorships
can be illusory, while history provides ample evidence that democracy reinforces long-term peace and
prosperity. In a recent essay, I illustrated this dichotomy as follows:

Rights in the Middle East,” Project on Middle East Democracy, April 2010.
12 “Democratic Debate in Las Vegas,” CNN.com, November 15, 2007,
In kayaking, you can choose one of two types of stability, but you cannot have both. A flat-bottomed kayak has high “initial stability”—it appears to ride smoothly in the water, with little rocking back and forth. But it has low “final stability”—in rough seas, it tends to quickly and catastrophically capsize. An angled-bottom kayak is just the opposite. With low initial stability, it takes more effort to guide and is prone to constant shifts from side to side. But these kayaks are faster and more efficient, and their high final stability means that they remain upright in stormy seas, and can recover even when turned nearly upside down.

Things are not so different with democracies and dictatorships. Democracy is messy—look at the United States, where in the last five years alone we have experienced swings from right to left and back again, and where political discourse can often be raucous. Dictatorships, on the other hand, often possess a superficial stability—until they reach the tipping point, which often comes more quickly than expected. Such was the case in Tunisia, which seemed an oasis of calm until a small spark quickly grew to consume the longstanding rule of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali.

Dictatorships lack the self-righting mechanisms and institutions which provide democracies with their deep stability. Free expression, free assembly, multiple and accountable political parties, free and fair elections, and independent courts—all of these form the vital structure of a democracy and provide an outlet for people’s grievances. In a dictatorship, people are denied these outlets and anger simmers beneath the surface, occasionally bursting through society’s calm veneer in violent fashion.13

The analogy is fanciful but fitting. Real stability comes not with the suppression of political expression, but with its responsible exercise. Democracy promotion, therefore, can over the long term serve the clear U.S. interest in regional stability in the Middle East.

Beyond cultivating long-term stability, democracy promotion efforts can sustain U.S. influence through regime transitions. Entrusting an important bilateral relationship to an individual dictator is not unlike having a one-stock portfolio—it is fraught with risk, regardless of the promised return. Lorne Craner, president of the International Republican Institute, described this risk in his February 9, 2011, testimony to Congress. He said, “Being so closely tied to authoritarians does not serve U.S. interests when the authoritarians fall from power and a political vacuum ensues. It is important, when we necessarily have relations with authoritarian governments, to plan for the day when they may no longer be in power, and to cultivate and assist those who may replace them.” Craner observed that the United States “assiduously

cultivated the next generation of leaders” in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan, so that it was well placed for continued good relations after revolutions in those countries.14

While analysts on the left have, as noted before, criticized past U.S. administrations for connecting democracy promotion with counterterrorism, the Obama administration has rightly maintained that political reform is essential to combating extremism. In her Doha speech, Secretary Clinton observed, “If leaders don’t offer a positive vision and give young people meaningful ways to contribute, others will fill the vacuum. Extremist elements, terrorist groups, and others who would prey on desperation and poverty are already out there, appealing for allegiance and competing for influence.”15 Other analysts have noted that authoritarian regimes and Islamists are (as Wollack observed regarding the far left and far right in South America) sometimes mutually reinforcing: Islamist parties are used cynically by authoritarian regimes to channel popular unrest, while simultaneously being held up to Western governments to defuse external pressure for political reform.16 This is not to say, of course, that extremists do not pose a real threat to fledgling democracies or could not exploit fragile transitions in the Middle East.

Finally, in the Middle East, repressive regimes tend also to experience high levels of unemployment, corruption, and economic stagnation. To the extent that political reforms and democratization are accompanied by economic reform and increased mobility for labor, capital, and goods, the United States and other open economies stand to benefit.

A Three-Pronged Approach to Democracy Promotion

Debates over democracy promotion are often muddled by the fact that promoting democracy can mean different things to different people. In fact, a comprehensive approach to democracy promotion requires three prongs: top-down work with governments, bottom-up work with civil society, and institution-building efforts to provide a connection between the two.17 It is tempting, and sometimes politically expedient, to focus on just one or two of these prongs and dispense with the others. However, doing so seems likely to fail and perhaps to backfire. For example, exclusively top-down or bottom-up efforts risk appearing hypocritical or unreasonably raising expectations for change; focusing exclusively on institution-building may simply increase the competence of an autocratic system.

15 Clinton, “Remarks at Forum for the Future.”
17 One might add a fourth prong: tending to our own democracy in the United States. That is beyond the scope of this paper but a legitimate extension of this topic.
Top-down democracy promotion involves working with or pressuring governments to open space for popular participation in politics. While this likely includes pressing for free, fair, and competitive elections and a pluralistic party system, it is not limited to calling for elections. Indeed, while the United States has been criticized in the past for a supposed overemphasis on elections in democracy promotion, Tom Carothers of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace asserts that “U.S. democracy promotion, programs, and policies for the most part do not reflect an exclusive or even an overweening emphasis on elections.”18 Other aspects of opening political space—the object of top-down efforts—include, but are not limited to, increasing participation (for example, by women and minorities) in politics; ensuring civil liberties such as freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, and—an apt addition made by Secretary Clinton—“freedom to connect”; and ensuring the independence of the judiciaries and legislatures. Top-down efforts should also focus on economic reform and corruption, which often are intimately connected to the structural underpinnings of autocratic regimes.

While top-down pressure on governments for political and economic reform can strain relations, so can many other diplomatic issues of interest to the United States—pressure for reform is hardly unique in this regard. The impression, however, that democracy promotion is not a core interest of the United States, but rather a luxury vaguely connected to our values, can lead senior and working-level officials alike to shy away from top-down pressure and instead focus on saving our diplomatic capital for more “strategic” issues. But this is a mistake—it is in the day-to-day work of diplomats and in the content of meetings and press conferences, not in one-off speeches, that democracy promotion policy truly resides.

Bottom-up democracy promotion, to put it simply, involves the provision of assistance to individuals and civil society organizations aimed at enhancing their political or, in some cases, economic participation. Bottom-up efforts raise issues which are perhaps more complicated than those implicated by top-down efforts—for example, whether to deal with certain parties (such as Islamists), the possibility that direct association with the United States or other Western governments may undermine civil society actors, and difficult decisions about whether to work with or around governments. For these and other reasons, the U.S. government frequently conducts its bottom-up democracy promotion efforts at arm’s length, through NGOs or multilateral bodies.

Institution-building efforts are the intermediary between top-down and bottom-up democracy promotion; if top-down efforts open political space and bottom-up efforts train individuals and organizations to fill that space, then institution-building efforts seek to provide that political space with

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In a sense, institution-building is the most important of the three prongs, in that decisions by leaders can be reversed, and individual members of civil society come and go, but effective and deeply rooted institutions—such as functioning courts and prisons, accountable legislatures, professional media, political parties, internet connectivity, and professional security services—can provide stability and sustainability to a process of democratization. But institution-building is also the most difficult and most slowly unfolding of the three prongs. Diplomacy and development must come together for successful institution-building, as maintaining its momentum and progress over time often requires working with a succession of governmental and civil society leaders.

Across these three prongs of democracy promotion, many tools are available to the United States. These include bilateral diplomacy, such as meetings between high-ranking officials which provide a venue to stress the importance of political reform to the United States; multilateral diplomacy, such as that conducted through the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) initiative through the G-8; cultural and public diplomacy, such as people-to-people and legislative exchanges; technological tools; public statements, such as the speeches noted earlier; public-private partnerships, such as the “Partners for a New Beginning” initiative launched in April 2010; financial and other forms of assistance; and tools such as sanctions, incentives, and occasionally coercion.

With this proliferation of lines of action and tools with which to advance them comes a need to organize the U.S. bureaucracy to effectively devise and implement democracy promotion strategies. Traditionally, crosscutting issues such as democracy promotion get little traction in the U.S. policymaking process, in large part because regionally focused offices and bureaus form the centers of power in the foreign policy community. Efforts to address this problem—whether by integrating the issues into the regional bureaus or otherwise enhancing their authority on paper—have met with little success, leaving the fate of democracy promotion to the energies and influence of individual officials who champion it. Like any policy initiative, even a well-conceived and well-articulated policy of democracy promotion, backed fully by the president, may stumble in the implementation if the bureaucratic context is not gotten right. To correct this problem, senior U.S. national security officials must ensure that a regional democracy focus is integrated into the highest-level discussions of Middle East policy issues, rather than relying on such considerations to be made at the base of the bureaucratic pyramid. They must also provide clearer guidance, ideally in the form of a concise and coherent national security strategy, to govern the day-to-day tradeoffs made in the field between democracy promotion and other issues.19

19 For more on the topic of reforming the national security decisionmaking process, see Michael Singh, “Making the NSC Work,” American Interest v, no. 2, November/December 2009.
Conclusion

With the United States engaged in military operations in support of an uprising in Libya, and facing uncertain outcomes in longtime allies Egypt, Tunisia, and Bahrain, it is no longer possible to claim that democracy promotion and political reform are not central to U.S. interests in the Middle East, or that opportunities to advance political reform in the region are scant. Washington’s relative inattention to democratization in recent years put it in a disadvantageous position when crises broke out in these countries, and has left U.S. officials playing catch-up as regional politics shift rapidly. Nevertheless, with a renewed and bipartisan emphasis on the promotion of democracy, and in concert with local and international partners, the United States can aid people in the Middle East in shaping not only more inclusive political regimes, but stronger relations with the United States and the West.