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ESSAYS ON U.S. POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



Reexamining U.S. Aid to the Middle East Ideas for Advancing Both Governance and Democracy

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Since the September 11 attacks, the United States has invested billions of dollars in supporting democracy activists and the democratization of governments in the Middle East.* Yet more than a decade after the 2010–11 Arab uprisings, by almost all objective measures, the prevalence of democracy, freedom, and human rights in the region has declined. Even Tunisia, once the exemplar of “Arab Spring” optimism, has slid backward since July 2021, after a series of authoritarian measures imposed by President Kais Saied. For its part, the Biden administration convened a Summit for Democracy in December 2021 to highlight the importance of democracy

amid the rise of global authoritarianism. But of the 110 participating countries, only Iraq—an endemically struggling and polarized state—was invited to attend from the Middle East.

The question thus arises of why the U.S. government continues to support democracy to the tune of nearly \$400 million a year in a region where the rights of citizens keep declining.

Abbreviations

ABA	American Bar Association
CIPE	Center for International Private Enterprise
ESF	Economic Support Funds
FDI	foreign direct investment
FMF	Foreign Military Financing
GJD	governing justly and democratically
IFES	International Foundation for Electoral Systems
INL	Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, U.S. Department of State
IRI	International Republican Institute
MOU	memorandum of understanding
NERD	Near East Regional Democracy Fund
NDI	National Democratic Institute
OGP	Open Government Partnership
PA	Palestinian Authority

Many have sought to explain why the Arab uprisings failed to achieve their aims of overthrowing corrupt and autocratic regimes and led instead to the complete breakdown of social order and in some cases to civil war. Such discussions have focused on the nature of regimes and the security services, the lack of cohesion within opposition forces, the priority placed on economic well-being versus political freedoms, the economic resources and disinformation campaigns applied to quell dissent, and the economic failings of democratic experiments. Regardless of the lens, few would dispute that the optimism of the 2010–11 period initially labeled as a “spring” has since deteriorated.

Far less commentary has been devoted to the relationship between U.S. government funding and these bleak outcomes.¹ Does the United States provide democracy assistance because it is part of the values-based component of American foreign policy, regardless of its effectiveness? Can the United States actually assist potential democrats or reformers when host countries manipulate what actors and entities it can support? Should the United States differentiate between “democracy” and “governance” assistance, which strive for two related but fundamentally different goals? Here one must distinguish: Democracy aid focuses on advancing the rights of citizens and improving representation—e.g., by supporting elections and democratic legislatures. Governance assistance, by comparison, addresses how flawed states provide for their citizens—e.g., by working with partner government

*This project benefited from the insights of more than a dozen policy and assistance professionals who shared their experiences in government and as program implementers. In crafting the study, the author is especially grateful for the research support provided by Faris Almaari, Sheridan Cole, Will Gilman, and Kyle Robertson, who enthusiastically and curiously met the task of compiling, organizing, and reconciling U.S. foreign assistance data and making sense of confusing acronyms. Thanks as well to Washington Institute publications team members Maria Radacsi and Jason Warshof, and to freelancer Miriam Himmelfarb, for improving every aspect of this Policy Note. The author finally would like to express his admiration for the dedication of all professionals in and out of government who work to improve democratic prospects and governance in the Middle East and North Africa.

ministries to improve financial transparency or service delivery. More fundamentally, does U.S. political support for authoritarian or antidemocratic governments undermine the purpose of these assistance funds?

As the data presented in this paper indicates, U.S. government assistance reflects a holistic approach and tends to support a little bit of everything without making the hard, country-specific choices about what might actually advance a freer Middle East. Further, no matter how much individual training programs accomplish, whether focused on civil society organizations or finance ministries, they are

vulnerable to the whims of leaders who might choose to arrest personnel in partner NGOs or pass laws banning foreign funding, as Egypt's Abdul Fattah al-Sisi did and Tunisia's Kais Saied threatens to do.

This paper aims to identify the value and limitations of programming by focusing on U.S. democracy assistance to the Middle East over the last decade,² and by focusing further on aid to Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia during significant years in these respective countries' political development. It concludes by offering recommendations for calibrating U.S. programs more effectively to improve democracy and governance.

// Why Democracy?

During the Cold War, the United States supported democratic movements abroad to counter Soviet influence, but just as often, it propped up right-wing authoritarian dictators facing domestic opposition, frequently through covert means. The architecture of U.S. support for nongovernmental democratic forces was established during the Reagan administration with the creation of the National Endowment for Democracy and its affiliated organizations: the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), and, later, the Solidarity Center. The Middle East-focused activities of these entities were limited until the 1990s, when the Oslo process made it more palatable for governments and citizens to accept assistance from American organizations.

The 9/11 attacks brought home the dangers of Islamist extremism to the United States. Several members of the George W. Bush administration attributed the rise in extremism to the absence of democracy in the region. According to their

view, the United States—by backing autocratic regimes that suppressed their populations and gave them little hope for legitimate political expression—helped al-Qaeda attract support. After the United States toppled one such autocrat, Saddam Hussein, then secretary of state Condoleezza Rice expressed these views at the American University in Cairo: “For 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region here in the Middle East—and we achieved neither. Now, we are taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people.”³

Even before the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, the previous year's landmark Arab Human Development Report, published by the UN Development Program, cited limited political freedoms, a lack of women's empowerment, and a knowledge deficit as core obstacles to the region's advancement. Two years later, Arab foreign ministers issued a joint statement committing to expand participation and decisionmaking in the political and public

spheres, uphold justice and equality among all citizens, respect human rights and freedom of expression, ensure the independence of national judiciaries, and advance the role of women in society.⁴ The analysis in the statement acknowledged that external factors such as the Iraq war or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were not the primary source of the region's troubles. Despite the foreign ministers' ambitious agenda, the region saw very limited progress in the years leading up to the 2011 uprisings.

For a time, the Bush administration took Rice's principles to heart. It pushed Hosni Mubarak's government in Egypt to adopt constitutional reforms, supported Palestinian legislative elections—in which Hamas won, an unintended consequence—and created the Middle East Partnership Initiative, which since its inception has provided more than \$3 billion in assistance to a variety of sectors, including civil society, women's empowerment, and education.

In 2010, the Obama administration undertook Presidential Study Directive 11, which examined the need for political reform in the Middle East as a key means to avert potential instability. The interagency study led to agreement that U.S. agencies needed to prioritize issues of reform and good governance in the region and raise them with their foreign counterparts, including defense and intelligence interlocutors who typically represented the most entrenched conservative interests within leaderships. The revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and then the civil wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen preempted a draft presidential directive formalizing this initiative, but the insights gleaned from the study helped frame some of the administration's post-uprising policies, which identified the fundamental

instability and unsustainability of these governments absent fundamental changes.⁵

Briefly, the Obama administration ramped up assistance funds to support emerging democratic forces and transitioning countries. For example, before Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made her second visit to post-revolutionary Tunisia, she announced an unusual \$100 million cash transfer to support the country's struggling economy.⁶ But as it became clearer that the initial protests were losing momentum and governments were pushing back with violence or with only minimal reforms, U.S. assistance programs were exposed as insufficient to overcome these trends.

In sum, for the last twenty years, U.S. support for democracy in the Middle East as a policy priority has been inconsistent at best. Immediate interests—whether involving energy (security) from the Gulf, security relationships, or peace between Israel and its neighbors—have been routinely prioritized over support for democracy or reform. Of course, the State Department or White House could make statements opposing specific anti-democratic actions from allied governments or add them to private talking points, but ultimately, as the data below suggests, the region's governments either ignored these protestations or quickly followed them with equally anti-democratic measures. In other words, another question that requires examination is whether any programmatic support for democracy can be effective if the U.S. government is routinely inconsistent with its actions—and partner countries in the region know and understand this. Hypocrisy is a part of any foreign policy, where rhetoric is often misaligned with relationships or actions, but it has a deeper meaning when funding is at stake.

// Post–Arab Spring Decline

By most objective measures, democracy has steadily declined in the Middle East since protesters took to the streets to challenge their governments in 2010 and 2011. After some election events early on, almost all countries experienced a decline in civil liberties and political rights, as measured annually by Freedom House. With a potential score of 100 (1–60 on civil liberties; 1–40 on political rights), average tallies in Middle East and North Africa countries were only 28 in 2011 and declined to 25 in 2021 (see figure 1). Tunisia, which came closest to democratic success after the Arab Spring, scored 71 in 2021 before President Saied’s authoritarian measures—thanks to multiple elections, the peaceful handover of power, and a negotiated constitution. Yet Saied undid those gains and continues to consolidate control more than a year after his initial dissolution of parliament. Tunisia’s score had declined to 64 before further measures by Saied, such as the controversial July 2022 constitutional referendum extending presidential powers.

For the three Middle East countries that have experienced civil wars over the last decade, Freedom House scores are unsurprisingly among the lowest in the region: Syria (1); Libya (9)—though it rose as high as 43 in 2013 after two sets of national elections; and Yemen (9). Bahrain dropped from 30 to 12 after its leadership cracked down on Shia protesters. Egypt rose from 25 in 2011 to 41 in 2013, then sank to 18 under President Sisi. Morocco and Jordan, the monarchies that responded to protests with pledges of reform, have remained mostly flat. Morocco has gone from 43 to 37 and Jordan from 35 to 33, reflecting the ability of both nations’ kings to promise reforms and deflect blame onto governments and prime ministers rather than driving fundamental change.

These data are also reflected in the World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators. The category

for “voice and accountability”—which measures how citizens perceive their ability to select their governments—and freedom of expression remained virtually unchanged for the region between 2012 and 2021, moving from a woeful 20.8 percent to 19 percent over that period (see figure 2).⁷ Only Tunisia exceeded 50 percent in 2021, while the remaining countries were all below Lebanon’s 31.9 percent.

















The World Bank’s “government effectiveness” ratings measure perceptions of public services along with the independence of civil servants, formulation and implementation of policy, and credibility of government pledges to implement policy. These effectiveness scores, more than those covering voice and accountability, reflect the key grievances underlying the Arab Spring, associated with a government’s ability to deliver quality or even basic services. These scores have also slipped over the last decade, from a regional average of 43.2 percent in 2012 to 40.4 percent in 2021. When one removes the Gulf Cooperation Council states, which earned the highest scores, the average declines from 30.1 percent to 24.7 percent (see figure 3).

A third governance indicator, control of corruption, reinforces the pattern. The regional average on this measure declined from 43.2 percent to 38.4 percent from 2012 to 2021; without the GCC, it fell from 29.9 percent to 22.9 percent. Yemen, Syria, and Libya barely even registered a score. In other words, citizens across the region viewed their governments as *more* corrupt than they did a decade after the popular uprisings that identified corruption as one of their targets (see figure 4).

Numerous factors have undoubtedly caused the declines in political freedom and government effectiveness. But the United States has invested around \$4 billion in democracy and governance work in MENA countries since the Arab uprisings, and the question remains: what has it all accomplished?

Figure 1.


















Freedom Scores in the Arab Middle East, 2011–21

Country	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
 Algeria	36	35	35	34	34	35	35	35	34	32	32
 Bahrain	30	20	18	16	15	14	12	12	12	11	12
 Egypt	25	35	41	31	26	27	26	26	22	18	18
 Iraq	25	25	24	25	24	27	27	31	32	31	29
 Jordan	34	35	34	35	36	36	37	37	37	37	34
 Kuwait	44	44	41	39	37	36	36	36	36	36	37
 Lebanon	52	51	49	48	44	43	44	43	45	44	43
 Libya	8	17	43	41	23	20	13	9	9	9	9
 Morocco	42	43	43	42	42	41	41	39	39	37	37
 Oman	27	27	26	26	26	25	25	23	23	23	23
 Qatar	28	28	28	28	28	27	26	24	25	25	25
 Saudi Arabia	12	10	10	10	10	10	10	7	7	7	7
 Tunisia	23	58	59	81	79	79	78	70	69	70	71
 United Arab Emirates	27	24	22	21	21	20	20	17	17	17	17
 West Bank/ Gaza	32/18	31/19	30/19	31/15	31/15	30/12	28/12	28/12	25/11	25/11	25/11
 Yemen	29	23	25	26	25	17	14	13	11	11	11
Average Score	28	30	30	30.5	28.6	27.6	26.8	25.6	25.2	25	25

Source: Freedom House “Global Freedom” metric. Total score includes 1–40 points for performance on political rights and 1–60 points for civil liberties.

Figure 2.


















Worldwide Governance Indicators for the Arab Middle East, 2012–21: Voice and Accountability

Country	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
 Algeria	22.5	23.9	25.1	24.6	23.7	23.2	21.3	19.8	18.4	20.8
 Bahrain	11.3	12.2	11.3	11.8	10.8	11.3	10.6	9.7	9.2	8.7
 Egypt	25.8	16.9	14.8	14.8	14.3	13.3	13.0	8.2	7.7	8.2
 Iraq	16.4	16.4	15.8	17.7	22.2	20.7	20.8	22.2	20.8	21.7
 Jordan	26.8	24.9	26.6	25.6	27.1	26.6	27.5	28.0	27.5	26.1
 Kuwait	27.7	28.2	28.6	28.1	29.1	30.5	30.0	28.5	30.0	30.0
 Lebanon	35.2	35.2	33.5	31.0	32.0	31.5	31.4	31.9	32.9	30.9
 Libya	23.0	20.7	17.2	10.8	8.4	9.4	6.8	7.7	11.6	10.1
 Morocco	29.1	27.2	27.6	28.6	29.6	28.6	29.5	29.0	30.4	31.9
 Oman	16.9	17.4	19.2	20.7	19.7	19.2	19.3	16.9	16.9	16.4
 Qatar	21.1	20.2	16.8	16.8	16.3	15.3	14.5	13.5	14.0	17.4
 Saudi Arabia	2.8	2.8	3.0	3.5	4.9	5.4	5.3	5.3	5.3	6.3
 Syria	3.3	3.3	3.5	3.0	1.5	2.0	1.9	1.5	1.5	1.0
 Tunisia	43.7	45.1	55.2	55.7	56.2	53.2	53.1	55.1	57.0	54.1
 United Arab Emirates	18.3	19.3	20.2	19.2	20.2	18.2	17.9	17.4	16.4	16.9
 West Bank and Gaza	20.7	22.5	22.7	21.7	18.7	21.7	22.2	20.8	25.1	19.3
 Yemen	9.4	11.7	11.8	7.4	5.4	5.9	3.9	4.4	4.4	3.9
Near East Total Average	20.8	20.5	20.8	20.1	20.0	19.8	19.4	18.8	19.4	19.0
Near East Average (without GCC)	23.3	22.5	23.1	21.9	21.7	21.5	21.0	20.8	21.6	20.7

Source: World Bank. While Freedom House treats the West Bank and Gaza separately, the Worldwide Governance Indicators combine the two areas within a single score. The same rule applies for figures 3–4.

Figure 3.


















Worldwide Governance Indicators for the Arab Middle East, 2012–21: Government Effectiveness

Country	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
 Algeria	35.1	35.1	35.1	35.6	35.6	30.8	34.1	33.7	33.7	29.8
 Bahrain	69.7	70.1	72.1	73.1	65.9	61.5	58.7	64.4	68.3	74.0
 Egypt	23.2	20.9	20.2	22.1	27.9	29.3	30.8	36.5	32.2	35.6
 Iraq	13.3	13.7	13.9	9.6	9.1	9.6	9.6	9.6	9.6	10.1
 Jordan	55.9	53.1	58.7	59.6	59.1	57.7	56.7	56.7	57.2	59.6
 Kuwait	51.7	52.1	47.1	52.4	48.1	46.6	49.5	52.9	45.7	51.4
 Lebanon	44.1	42.7	40.9	37.0	35.1	33.7	23.1	17.8	11.5	10.6
 Libya	4.3	5.7	1.9	1.9	1.4	1.9	1.9	1.9	1.9	3.4
 Morocco	52.6	53.6	50.5	51.0	49.0	45.2	45.7	47.6	52.9	51.0
 Oman	61.6	61.1	63.9	55.3	62.0	61.1	59.6	62.5	58.2	48.1
 Qatar	77.7	81.0	76.4	77.4	74.5	75.0	75.5	75.0	78.4	82.7
 Saudi Arabia	58.3	57.8	62.0	61.5	63.9	63.9	65.4	64.9	58.7	68.8
 Syria	12.3	6.6	7.2	5.3	2.4	2.4	3.4	3.4	2.9	2.9
 Tunisia	55.0	51.7	48.1	49.0	44.2	50.0	49.0	48.6	43.8	45.7
 United Arab Emirates	83.4	83.4	88.9	90.9	89.9	90.4	90.4	89.4	88.0	89.9
 West Bank and Gaza	27.0	26.5	34.1	37.5	29.3	36.5	20.2	23.1	28.9	22.1
 Yemen	8.5	11.4	6.7	3.4	1.9	1.4	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
Near East Total Average	43.2	42.7	42.8	42.5	41.2	41.0	39.7	40.5	39.5	40.4
Near East Average (without GCC)	30.1	29.2	28.9	28.4	26.8	27.1	25.0	25.4	25.0	24.7

Source: World Bank

Figure 4.

Worldwide Governance Indicators for the Arab Middle East, 2012–21: Control of Corruption

Country	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
 Algeria	37.4	39.3	32.2	29.8	27.9	30.8	27.9	29.3	28.4	29.8
 Bahrain	67.8	68.7	63.9	61.1	57.7	52.4	51.4	55.8	53.4	60.6
 Egypt	33.2	31.8	30.8	30.8	31.3	35.6	32.2	27.9	22.6	26.9
 Iraq	9.5	7.6	5.8	4.8	6.3	6.7	7.7	8.7	9.1	9.1
 Jordan	60.2	60.2	60.1	64.4	64.9	63.5	60.6	60.6	59.6	57.7
 Kuwait	52.1	53.1	51.0	51.4	48.1	44.2	45.2	51.4	53.9	53.4
 Lebanon	19.4	19.4	13.9	19.2	13.9	14.9	12.0	12.0	12.0	10.6
 Libya	3.3	1.0	1.4	1.0	1.9	1.4	2.9	2.4	2.9	3.8
 Morocco	39.8	44.1	50.5	52.4	53.9	51.9	47.6	46.2	42.8	36.5
 Oman	63.0	63.0	65.4	64.9	66.4	63.9	62.0	67.3	62.0	60.1
 Qatar	81.5	82.0	80.3	78.4	80.3	76.9	77.4	79.8	77.9	78.8
 Saudi Arabia	57.8	59.2	59.1	58.2	63.9	66.4	66.4	63.5	63.0	64.4
 Syria	10.0	8.5	2.4	1.9	2.4	2.4	1.9	1.4	0.5	0.5
 Tunisia	56.9	57.4	55.8	56.3	53.4	52.9	55.8	52.9	52.4	49.5
 United Arab Emirates	83.4	87.2	83.2	82.7	84.1	82.7	83.7	83.2	83.2	84.1
 West Bank and Gaza	50.7	49.8	50.0	40.4	51.9	57.2	48.6	43.3	31.3	26.0
 Yemen	8.5	9.0	1.9	2.9	1.4	1.9	1.4	1.9	1.9	1.4
Near East Total Average	43.2	43.6	41.6	41.2	41.7	41.5	40.3	40.4	38.6	38.4
Near East Average (without GCC)	29.9	29.8	27.7	27.6	28.1	29.0	27.1	26.1	24.0	22.9

Source: World Bank

// What Is Democracy Assistance?

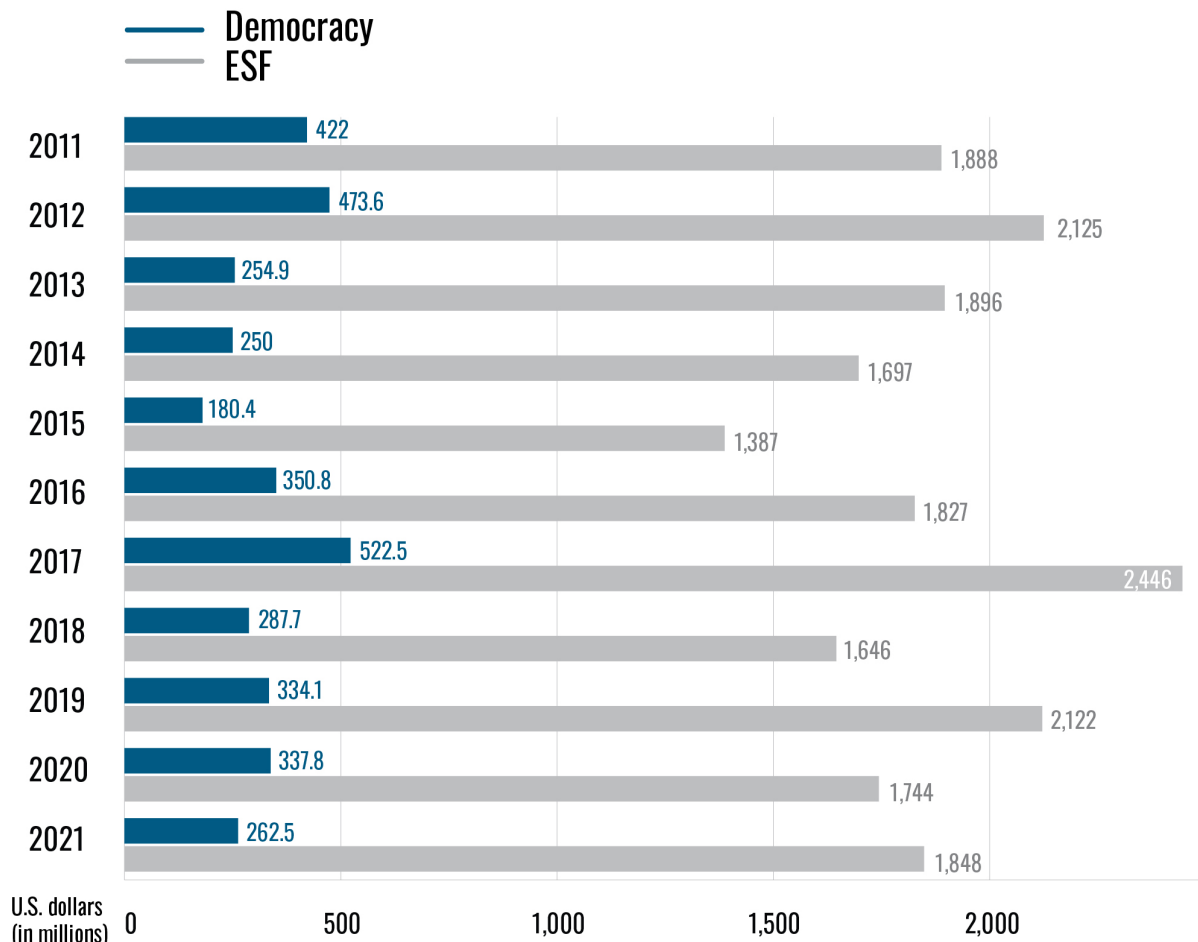
Democracy assistance constitutes a small portion of overall U.S. economic aid to the Middle East—known as Economic Support Funds (ESF), in the language of appropriations. On average, democracy assistance accounted for around \$350 million of \$1.8 billion in ESF spending between 2011 and 2021, or less than 20 percent (see figure 5).

The democracy and governance assistance category of ESF is described as “governing justly and democratically,” or GJD.⁸ Such assistance

includes helping countries with their conduct of elections, support for institutions like parliaments and judiciaries, and training of civil society to participate in government processes. GJD also helps governments deliver to their populations, and is composed of four “strategic goals”: (1) supporting civil society, which over the last decade has comprised on average 30.5 percent of assistance funds; (2) good governance (29.5%); (3) rule of law and human rights (28.1%); and (4) political competition and consensus building (11.9%). Of note, those relative divisions

Figure 5.

Democracy Assistance Compared to Overall ESF in the Arab Middle East and North Africa, 2011–21



Source: Washington Institute

Figure 6.

Percentage of GJD Spending by Strategic Goal, 2012–20

Strategic Goal	Percentage of USG Assistance/Total GDJ									
	FY12	FY13	FY14	FY15	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19	FY20	Average
Rule of Law and Human Rights	28.2	32.3	29.8	28	20.5	18.2	33.8	36.4	26.1	28.1
Good Governance	19.9	12.4	20.6	24.6	40	47.1	37.1	36	28	29.5
Political Competition, Consensus Building	12	16.8	12.7	13.6	11.5	6.9	11.3	8.3	13.7	11.9
Civil Society	39.9	38.5	36.9	33.8	28	27.8	17.8	19.3	32.2	30.5

Sources: For fiscal year 2012, see Stephen McInerney and Cole Bockenfeld, *The Federal Budget and Appropriations for 2016: Democracy, Governance, and Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa* (Washington DC: Project on Middle East Democracy, 2015), 62, <http://pomed.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/FY2016-Budget-Report.pdf>. For FY 2013–20, see Seth Binder, *Back to Business as Usual: President Biden’s First Foreign Affairs Budget for the Middle East and North Africa* (Washington DC: Project on Middle East Democracy, 2021), 79, https://pomed.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/POMED_BudgetReport_FY22_final.pdf.

have not changed substantially from year to year. In 2020, human rights and support for independent media were separated into their own categories, distinct from the rule of law (see figure 6).

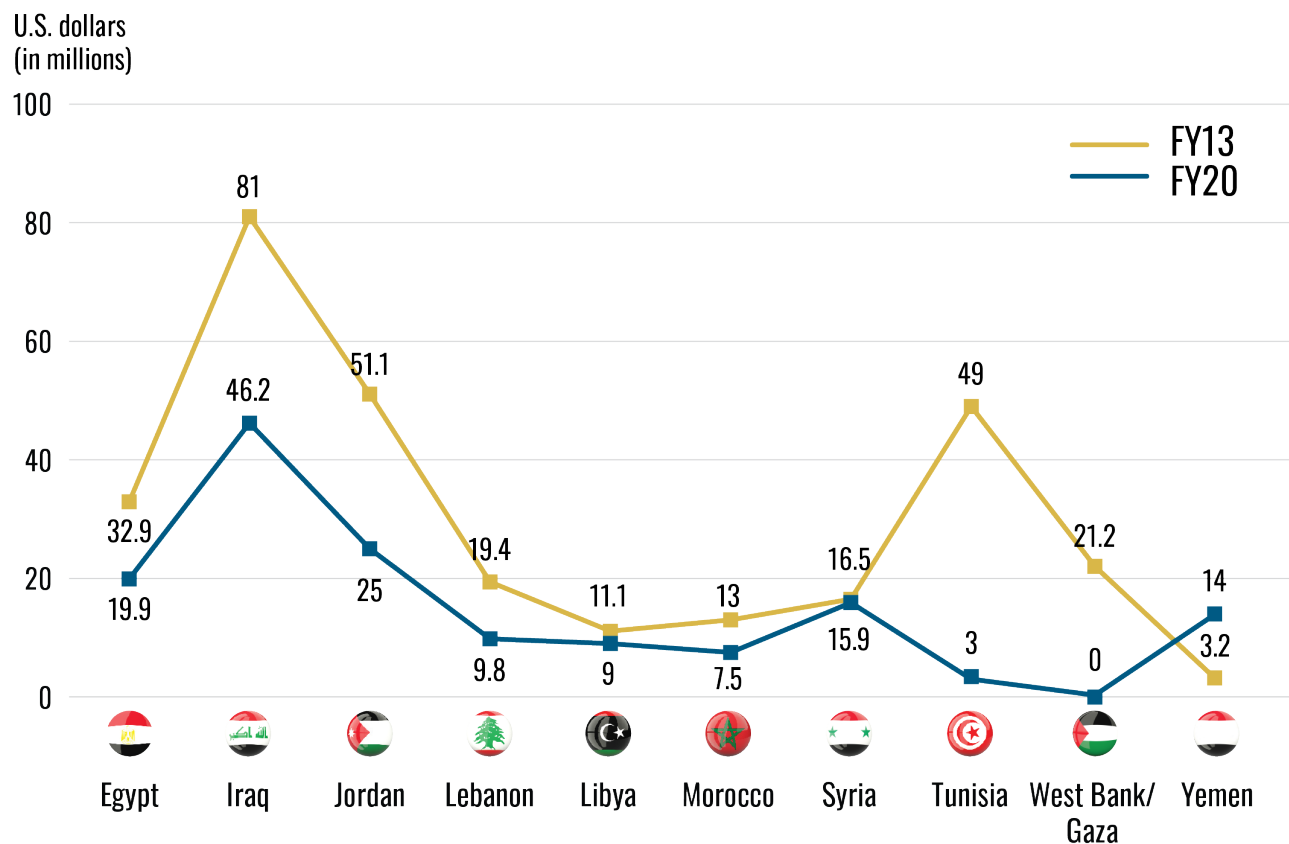
At least half of ESF for the Middle East goes to Jordan, based on a four-year memorandum of understanding between the Hashemite Kingdom and the United States, which became effective in 2018, and congressional interest in supporting the kingdom. Jordan received \$845 million a year in 2021 and 2022 in direct budget support, categorized as “economic growth”—around 2.5 times the total amount of democracy and governance assistance provided to the rest of the Middle East combined.⁹

For fiscal year 2013, the first budget planned for GJD funds after the Arab uprisings, funding was prioritized as follows: Iraq (\$46.2 million), Jordan (\$25 million), West Bank/Gaza (\$21.2 million),

Egypt (\$19.9 million), Syria (\$15.9 million), Yemen (\$14 million), Lebanon (\$9.8 million), Libya (\$9 million), Morocco (\$7.5 million), and Tunisia (\$3 million). By comparison, in FY 2020, Iraq still received the most (\$81 million), followed by Jordan (\$51.1 million), Tunisia (\$49 million), Egypt (\$32.9 million), Lebanon (\$19.4 million), Syria (\$16.5 million), Morocco (\$13 million), Libya (\$11.1 million), and Yemen (\$3.2 million) (see figure 7). The notable changes were due to Tunisia’s demonstrated electoral successes and constitutional negotiations; legal and policy restrictions prohibiting U.S. support for the Palestinian Authority, including the Taylor Force Act and the Trump administration’s corresponding decision to stop ESF to the PA; as well as limited access to Yemen and a shift toward humanitarian relief.

GJD assistance can help partner states improve their capacity to deliver services effectively

Figure 7.
GJD Funds Allocated in FY 2013 and FY 2020



Source: Washington Institute

and transparently, or it can provide targeted assistance to populations through civil society to demand better responsiveness from government. In theory, both processes could happen at the same time if host governments supported genuine reforms. In reality, government leaders and entrenched bureaucracies tend to resist reforms that threaten their positions and thus have an incentive to shape or, more significantly, coopt U.S.-provided democracy and governance assistance.

Most GJD support is directed through host governments, whether it is intended to improve responsiveness or service delivery at the national or local level or to support formal institutions of democracy such as electoral systems, judiciaries, or legislative bodies. According to one U.S. official involved in assistance programming,

after the Arab uprisings, a deliberate shift saw further emphasis placed on aiding local- rather than national-level government in order to better address public demands for improved services.¹⁰ However, training municipal councils to interact with local populations, or providing them with the necessary technology and equipment to process requests, can only go so far without national-level changes that promote decentralization. This is because few Middle East countries allow local governments to generate their own revenue. Many national governments also maintain local arms that inhibit independent practices by municipalities. Therefore, regardless of the intent of a particular local-level “train and equip” program focused on basic services like public sanitation, the effectiveness of such an effort will be limited absent national-level decentralization efforts.

// Three Cases: Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia

The examples of Egypt (2013), Jordan (2018), and Tunisia (2018) are particularly helpful in illustrating how the United States funds GJD programs, because these three countries have navigated various stages of reform since 2011 and have distinct relationships with the United States.

For Egypt, where protest activity in Tahrir Square lit the imagination of the Arab world regarding the possibility of change, U.S. assistance programs for FY 2013—after the election of Mohamed Morsi in 2012 but before the 2013 coup by General Sisi—provide a useful window for consideration. Namely, these programs included various efforts that did not

sufficiently address the needs of a transitioning country even before the coup. As for Hashemite Kingdom, FY 2018 was the first year of the U.S.-Jordan MOU, which elevated overall assistance to the country—yet the increased governance assistance yielded limited improvements, as measured by the World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators. For Tunisia, FY 2018 was also significant because programs for the period reflected priorities in advance of the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections. Yet while those political developments proceeded laudably on a technical basis, the underlying political and governance shortcomings were not addressed, leaving space for President Saïed’s eventual power grab.¹¹



Egypt

The FY 2013 U.S. budget included \$19.9 million for GJD funds for Egypt, the most populous Arab country, whose people arguably led the uprisings. (For the sake of comparison, Egypt received \$135 million for investing in people; \$84.8 million for economic growth; and \$1.244 billion for peace and security, the vast majority delivered through the traditional Foreign Military Financing, or FMF, program that has supported Egypt's military since the Camp David Accords.) The \$19.9 million for GJD funds represented 8.2 percent of all ESF to Egypt that year, which included an unusual \$190 million cash transfer to the government. GJD funds were divided among:

- Rule of law and human rights (\$8.1 million)
- Good governance (\$7.2 million)
- Political competition, consensus building (\$3 million)
- Civil society (\$1.5 million)

For the top GJD-funded programs in 2013, see figure 8.

In the narrow window between Morsi's election and Sisi's coup, the U.S. government was focused on three primary initiatives: (1) elections support and democracy awareness, managed by the elections consortium (noted in figure 8); (2) decentralization to help localities become more capable and involved in governing issues, run primarily by the infrastructure giant AECOM; and (3) capacity-building programs, managed by civil society and other awardees.

All three initiatives faced major obstacles. With elections, despite the transparency of the procedures, Sisi denied Morsi's victory. Decentralization was challenged by the Egyptian bureaucracy, and even if it had not been, transforming such a massive government would have been a multiyear process. In the civil society

realm, training and developing partners became an immediate problem in 2011 after new rules required emerging organizations to register and comply with more government restrictions. When many did not, security services raided the offices of Egyptian and American NGOs, leading to arrests. In the so-called Case 173 in 2012–13, after civil society organizations were prohibited from receiving foreign funding, dozens of Egyptians were arrested and charged, and charges were brought against American and foreign employees of NDI, Freedom House, and others well-established international NGOs. As a result, the United States stopped funding civil society activities writ large, negating a key element of U.S. democracy assistance.

A 2015 survey by the USAID Office of the Inspector General described the challenge of working in post-revolutionary Egypt by noting that mission officials and implementers cited frequent government personnel turnover and reluctance by those in temporary positions to sign agreements, while adding that "some Egyptian Government officials brought unique personal concerns and political biases...[or] were weary or skeptical of U.S. assistance."¹²

There is no way any one program or even \$100 million in democracy assistance (five times the FY 2013 total) could have prevented the coup against Morsi and the military rule Sisi imposed. But the question remains whether actions could have been taken at the beginning of the revolution to normalize certain elements, like the legitimacy of civil society organizations or independent media, apart from what would become the zero-sum war against the Muslim Brotherhood. Unfortunately, the White House was torn at the time by whether to label Sisi's takeover a coup, which would have legally required it to halt most assistance

while enduring strong pro-Sisi, anti-Muslim Brotherhood appeals from Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, when the latter two were providing far greater funding to Egypt than was the United States.

In the case of Egypt, GJD funding achieved little in the brief period from the uprising until Sisi's coup, given countervailing forces generated by

what is often referred to as the "deep state," as well as mismanagement by the new Muslim Brotherhood-led government. The interventions made through U.S. funding were too little, spread too thin, and disconnected from the political realities in Washington, which was (and still is) trying to define the nature of the post-Mubarak era U.S.-Egypt relationship.

Figure 8.

Top GJD-Funded Programs in Egypt, 2013

Program Implementer(s)	Program Description	Funding Amount
Elections consortium (National Democratic Institute, International Republican Institute, International Foundation for Electoral Systems, American Bar Association)	Technical assistance and information on electoral systems, processes, and election administration to Egyptian stakeholders	\$2.89 million
Management Systems International	Capacity building to civil society	\$2.4 million
AECOM	Support for Egypt's decentralization efforts, with a focus on community priorities and strengthening local government administrative capacity	\$2.45 million
Relief International	Egypt transition support	\$2 million
Unnamed contributor	Support for broadening democratic participation in Egypt	\$1.1 million
Internews	Support for free media and training for future generations to build a more representative Egypt	\$914,000
American Bar Association	Improvement to legal services in Egypt	\$914,000
National Democratic Institute	Funding for Transition Support Grants Program, aimed at increasing public participation in elections and political processes	\$480,000

Jordan

The assistance budget for Jordan in FY 2018, the first year covered by the \$1.275-billion-per-year MOU, included \$76.4 million in GJD funds, or 7 percent of \$1.082 billion in ESF. The primary focus of U.S. ESF was supporting Jordan's economy, including a \$425 million transfer for budget assistance—a figure that nearly doubled in four years, to \$845 million, in FY 2021 and FY 2022. In FY 2018, bilateral assistance to Jordan was divided into peace and security (\$442.6 million), mostly FMF; investing in people (\$217.8 million); economic growth (\$788.2 million, including the cash transfer); and GJD funds (\$76.4 million).

For their part, GJD funds were divided among:

- Rule of law and human rights (\$31.3 million)
- Good governance (\$23.4 million)
- Political competition, consensus building (\$20.2 million)
- Civil society (\$1.5 million)

For the top GJD-funded programs in 2018, see figure 9.

The U.S.-Jordan bilateral relationship is among the closest in the region, as reflected in political and extensive monetary American support for the kingdom. Jordan was the third-largest U.S. aid recipient in FY 2018, behind only Israel and Afghanistan. Historically, the United States has backed Jordan's political and economic reform process but has given King Abdullah substantial leeway in the timing of reform measures. In terms of GJD spending, the divided focus on public financial management, human rights practices in law enforcement, support for local governance, elections assistance, and civil society reflects a comprehensive approach. Nevertheless, the U.S. investment of almost \$80 million in these efforts in a single year—four times the amount spent on Egypt for a tenth of the population—has not substantially altered Jordan's Freedom House or Worldwide Governance Indicator scores.



Figure 9.

Top GJD-Funded Programs in Jordan, 2018

Program Implementer(s)	Program Description	Funding Amount
FHI 360 and Chemonics— <i>Cities Implementing Transparent, Innovative & Effective Solutions (CITIES)</i>	Focus on strengthening Jordan's civil society sector by building institutional capacity of a new generation of intermediary organizations that support local actors	\$6.9 million (FHI 360) + \$4.89 million (Chemonics) = \$11.79 million
Deloitte— <i>Jordan Fiscal Reform and Public Financial Management</i>	Goals: (1) Revenue performance through improved tax policy and administration (2) Budget efficiency and transparency (3) Fiscal sustainability through structural reforms	\$2.4 million
Tetra Tech Inc.— <i>Rule of Law and Public Accountability Strengthening (ROLPAS)</i>	A five-year program to establish protections for human and legal rights, enhance judicial reforms, and foster accountability across executive branch	\$9.25 million
IRI, NDI, ABA— <i>Consortium for Elections and Political Processes Strengthening (CEPPS)</i>	Focus on encouraging more pluralistic, representative political competition by strengthening the foundations of political participation and democratic development	\$5.8 million
Global Communities— <i>Community Engagement Project (CEP)</i>	Targeted assistance toward 20 communities to address tensions caused by weak local governance, tribal dynamics, and an influx of Syrian refugees	\$5 million

Tunisia

In FY 2018, Tunisia received one of the largest proportions of GJD funds of any country in the region, amounting to \$44.2 million of \$81.8 million in ESF (54%) and 26 percent of all bilateral assistance (\$83.85 million for peace and security; \$37.6 million for economic growth). GJD funds were divided among:

- Rule of law and human rights (\$4.8 million)
- Good governance (\$17.6 million)
- Political competition, consensus building (\$5.4 million)
- Civil society (\$16.4 million)

For the top GJD-funded programs in 2018, see figure 10.

Additionally, the National Endowment for Democracy—whose funding may include portions of its global discretionary budget—gave twenty-five grants in 2018 totaling \$2.1 million. Its largest grants were \$620,000 to CIPE to expand the engagement of local private sector actors in regional development and economic reform, and \$600,000 to IRI to strengthen the local-level capacity of Tunisian political parties for the upcoming elections. It also gave small grants, as low as \$20,000, to Tunisian civil society

organizations for specific, focused projects.

The United States spread the nearly \$45 million in GJD funds allocated to Tunisia over rule of law issues (in this case, also classified as good governance), advancing the work of municipal governance, and a program to modernize Tunisia's tax system. The democracy portion included supporting the election commission—which Saied replaced on a whim in early 2022—and civil society. Unfortunately, these interventions did little to stem the economic malaise and government ineffectiveness that served as a prelude to Saied's election and his subsequent anti-democratic measures. The three long-term projects—to reform the security services, train municipalities, and reform taxation—were well designed. Nevertheless, they highlight the problem of spreading funds too thin while underestimating Tunisia's vulnerability to a serious democratic rollback, largely due to chronically poor leadership on economic reforms. While seemingly pushing on an open door to increase civic participation and expand civil society, U.S. GJD programming and, more important, overall policy toward Tunisia did not sufficiently pursue the economic reforms and improvements that the country required.



Tunisia Accountability, Decentralization, and Effective Municipalities (TADAEEM) Activity

Figure 10.

Top GJD-Funded Programs in Tunisia, 2018

Program Implementer(s)	Program Description	Funding Amount
Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL), U.S. State Department	Build transparency, capacity, and sustainability in promoting citizen security and rule of law—e.g., by training National Police and National Guard officers in crowd control and hostage rescue, and by funding Tunisia’s Anti-Corruption Agency, cybercrime investigations, and forensic analysis capabilities	\$18 million
Deloitte— <i>Tunisia Accountability, Decentralization, and Effective Municipalities (TADAEEM)</i>	Work with 11 governorates and 39 municipalities to improve citizen participation in and oversight of key government functions	\$4.3 million (of a 5-year, \$50 million program)
Chemonics— <i>Fiscal Reform for a Strong Tunisia (FIRST)</i>	Improve efficiency, transparency, and cost of compliance with tax administration	\$2.9 million (of a 4-year, \$17.6 million program)
Elections consortium	For election monitoring, establish domestic monitoring efforts, and promote voter education and voter registration campaigns and other civic engagement support, especially for women, youth, and other traditionally marginalized groups	\$2.56 million
FHI 360	Support 30 civil society organizations and local authorities, along with 33 Tunisian communities, to increase youth participation in civic and political life, address youth grievances, and prevent radicalization in vulnerable communities	\$1.2 million (of a planned \$4.85 million over five years)

// Democracy as a Policy Priority

Over the past decade, American support for democracy and human rights in the Middle East has achieved little in terms of the objective measures noted above. Yet four main arguments can be used to justify continued U.S. support for programs advancing these objectives:

- 1. Promoting values.** The United States should continue trying to advance these goals because it believes in human rights and has always advocated democratic progress regardless of the prospects of progress.
- 2. Preventing further backsliding.** The United States invests in democracy and human rights despite limited prospects for success because if it did not, the Middle East would decline further and faster. In other words, the United States has adopted a preventive strategy.
- 3. Working on the margins.** Democratic transitions undoubtedly take time and are inconsistent. If the United States stays engaged and develops key relationships with civil society actors and provides a voice to dissidents, it will eventually have an opportunity to support their efforts more practically. Washington is providing them the necessary tools to succeed when this opportunity arises.
- 4. Disbursing more funding, more widely.** The United States would likely have greater success if it funded more activities in more places.

Each of these arguments has inherent problems. Washington has a long history of promoting democracy and human rights in challenging areas, but its diplomacy and programming efforts are inconsistent and its foreign policy inherently contains elements of hypocrisy. U.S. leaders may protest unjust imprisonments or assist NGOs, but eventually the United States will revert to government-to-government ties

for practical, economic, counterterrorism, or other reasons. U.S. policy may be “values based” to a greater or lesser extent depending on the administration, but there is no such thing as a true values-based foreign policy, especially in the Middle East, where U.S. interests have almost always superseded values.

There is conflicting evidence about whether U.S. foreign aid could have prevented backsliding in the Middle East over the last decade. Sometimes, when such assistance has been cut off, like when the Trump administration barred aid to the PA or when Washington was forced to stop supporting Egyptian civil society, clear backsliding occurred on issues of democracy. Conversely, democratic movements have arisen without any connection to the United States, such as Algeria’s Hirak, which emerged organically in 2019 in response to President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s prospective run for a fourth term, and whose members intentionally distanced themselves from foreign ties.

At the same time, consistent, limited democracy assistance may pay dividends when political opportunities do emerge, as occurred during Tunisia’s revolution. During this period, few U.S. contacts existed with Tunisia’s repressed civil society under the Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali government, except for the country’s strong unions and some American counterparts.

More assistance for specific areas might possibly improve the region’s democratic prospects, but it is hard to imagine significantly different outcomes had the United States spent \$800 billion versus \$400 billion over the last decade, without a corresponding change in policy and priorities. Add to that the limited absorptive capacity of transitioning governments and NGOs, and one struggles to accept the proposition that more money equates to greater freedoms or more democracy.

// The Governance-as-Democracy Trap

The central dilemma regarding U.S. governance assistance is whether such programs help solidify undemocratic societies, albeit with governments friendly to Washington, and thus, ironically, decrease their prospects for democracy. This can be conceived as a governance-as-democracy trap. If the United States supports improved governance activities in Jordan, Morocco, or Tunisia because it believes these programs will help their governments process funds, improve transparency, or deliver essential services—ultimately making their societies less prone to dissent and therefore more stable—that is one thing. But one should be under no illusion that these programs will promote citizen freedoms at the same time. While this does not constitute an explicit trade of

governance for freedom like the models exhibited, to varying degrees, by the governments of China, the Persian Gulf, or Singapore, the United States should be wary of adopting assistance strategies that emphasize improving governance at the expense of citizen freedoms.

As the Worldwide Governance Indicators suggest, though, even investing in improving governance has not yielded desired results in governance categories or paid dividends in freedoms. Any commitment targeting good governance should thus include requirements for civic participation, public auditing, or press freedoms that help reduce opportunities for corruption or open space for true municipal-level governance.

// Avoiding the Governance-as-Democracy Trap

If the United States wants to be more consistent in promoting a “values-based” foreign policy through its assistance programs—and concurrently improve citizen participation in and monitoring of government—it can focus on three areas: supporting local politics; promoting and protecting independent media; and encouraging national and local anti-corruption and transparency efforts. Of course, Washington should continue to support elections and independent electoral commissions with its expert NGOs and monitoring delegations, but only when the elections stand a reasonable chance of being free and fair.¹³ And it remains important to support civil society throughout the region, but the United States should be more intentional in channeling funds to smaller NGOs that are more directly linked to their communities, rather than to elite, English-speaking NGOs capable of filing

the reports often required to receive U.S. funding. Additionally, U.S. funding for community-based NGOs will help circumvent government manipulation of their programs, since their legitimacy derives from local ties. Finally, the efficacy of awarding grants to multibillion-dollar companies such as Deloitte, Tetra Tech, or AECOM as opposed to smaller NGOs or development specialists—although a topic beyond the scope of this paper—must be examined, since it is clearly important when reviewing spending in the Middle East.

Localizing Politics

Several programs across the region have supported decentralization initiatives aimed at advancing the capacity and professionalism of municipal governments. Individuals are

more likely to engage in politics—according to thinking about bottom-up democratization—if they have access to local representatives who, in turn, can affect their lives by improving services or influencing the central government.¹⁴ This stands in contrast to the history of strong central governments throughout the region, whether they are monarchies or so-called republics. In theory, supporting municipal governments and decentralization promotes democracy. But in practice, as one USAID professional explained, these efforts have often been stymied by the absence of corresponding legal reforms by central governments, which instead maintain local representatives who undermine local governing autonomy and inhibit independent sources of revenue.¹⁵ Finally, the decentralization of governments and societies—or the move away from central authority—is a long-term process and requires patience.

Whatever the hurdles, it is important to continue supporting local-level politics as a means of promoting basic democratic engagement for citizens. Such efforts must include diplomatic and political pressure on allied recipients of aid—especially Jordan and Morocco, which have initiated decentralization programs—to ensure they are implementing their pledged, necessary reforms.

To support decentralization efforts, the United States should:

- Work with partner countries to implement laws focused on developing the means to raise revenue locally to improve specific services based on local requirements, thus helping establish independent budgetary authority.
- Design evaluation studies to measure the effectiveness of programs in which Washington has assisted communities and those in which it has not, and determine the cause of project shortcomings.
- Encourage youth and women’s civic involvement.

Independent Media

The 2021 Summit for Democracy emphasized the importance of supporting independent media, but only one Middle East representative participated in the summit’s plenary panel on “Empowering Human Rights Defenders and Independent Media.” This dearth of Middle East independent media participants was noted during an off-the-record Washington Institute seminar on the topic in December 2021. In that seminar, regional journalists and experts discussed the challenges they face—not just the danger of threats and imprisonment when they write in opposition to their governments or the issue of self-censorship, but also the limited funds available to sustain their work.

Presumably, U.S. assistance would help support these individuals and organizations. During the Democracy Summit, the United States committed \$9 million to a new Defamation Defense Fund, designed to help journalists defray legal fees; \$30 million to support the International Fund for Public Interest Media, a new multi-donor resource designed to enhance the independence, development, and sustainability of independent media; and \$3.5 million to establish a Journalism Protection Platform, which will provide at-risk journalists with digital and physical security training, psychosocial care, legal aid, and other assistance. How much of these global funds will go to the Middle East remains to be seen. At the summit, Canada, the Netherlands, and the NGO Internews, which trains and promotes the work of independent journalists, were appointed leads of an entity called the Media Freedom Cohort.

Starting in FY 2021, the United States began to direct a specific category of democracy and governance funds toward “independent media and free flow of information.” Yet in the FY 2023 request, only two Middle East countries received such funding lines: Jordan (\$4 million) and Libya (\$1.4 million). Yemen received \$1 million for media in FY 2021 and Iraq \$500,000 in FY 2022. However, one of the main missions of the Near

East Regional Democracy Fund, created under the Obama administration to broaden a George W. Bush administration effort focused on Iran, is to support independent and free media. The NERD Fund budget has been at \$16.5 million for each of the past three years. According to the fund's budget justification:

Implementation occurs through third-country training, the creation and provision of online training and media content, the promotion of digital freedom, and grants and sub-grants to non-governmental organizations. NERD programming results in outcomes such as the deployment of anti-censorship tools for enhanced internet access, access to secure communication tools, increased ability of civil society to advocate for citizen priorities and for increased access to justice and respect for civil rights, documentation about human rights violations, and the training of investigative journalists to research and report on issues of concern to citizens.¹⁶

A certain portion of this funding is dedicated to supporting independent media and the free flow of information in hostile states like Iran or states that cannot receive direct ESF funds due to their income status or opposition to such U.S.-run programs, including several Gulf countries. These types of activities can be highly effective during political protests in Iran, for example, although they can also provide the regime an excuse for blaming domestic unrest on foreign interference.

When supporting independent media organizations or individuals, the United States should follow several principles to ensure effectiveness:

- **Communicate broadly with the community seeking assistance.** The United States should create an advisory board of regional journalists who can consult on key issues and advise on how to direct funds most effectively.

- **Deemphasize traditional training efforts.**

Professionalism and experience in many countries is often less of an issue than government-imposed censorship or self-censorship from fear of state-imposed consequences. That said, there is an obvious need to create a cohort of journalists committed to pursuing careers in the field. One way of doing so is to fund journalism programs in universities across the region—as distinct from American universities that have a regional presence in different countries. For example, the American University of Beirut, regarded as the premier higher education institution in the Arab world, does not have a journalism program.

- **Reinforce the impartiality of media grantees.** The easiest way to delegitimize civil society members, especially those involved in media or information, is to identify them as foreign sponsored and thereby cast doubt on their impartiality—the exact opposite of the intent of supporting independent media. Therefore, a considerable challenge is to award grants to independent media organizations needing financial lifelines in a way that can preserve their true impartiality. This can be done through prizes, fellowships, or by channeling grants through international or third-party organizations.

Most important, journalists, bloggers, or those otherwise representing independent information sources must receive priority from U.S. embassies when they face imprisonment, and appeals from Washington when the punishment is egregious. And the United States should advocate publicly for loosening rules about criticizing governments or reporting on government malpractice so long as the actors are not advocating violence. Funding independent media will mean little without a corresponding political and diplomatic push to advocate the improved status of free information in the region.

- **Prioritize offering access to independent media.** A recent example is Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf’s wide-ranging interview with *Mada Masr* during an October 2022 visit to Cairo.¹⁷

Anti-Corruption

Another theme emerging from the Summit for Democracy was the importance of anti-corruption and transparency initiatives in maintaining and strengthening democracy. The summit established a cohort for “Financial Transparency and Integrity,” to be led by the United States, the Open Government Partnership, and the Brookings Institution.¹⁸ Promoting anti-corruption activity is critical to addressing the original grievances of the Arab uprisings, such as (1) petty corruption from officials demanding bribes, or else systematic corruption; (2) mismanaged resources, or the perception of such; or (3) the inability of citizens to start businesses seen as competing with entrenched interests. However pronounced outrage was in 2011 regarding corruption, World Bank scores suggest governments control corruption less than they did a decade ago. In other words, corruption has actually worsened across the region over the last decade, especially in states outside the Gulf.

Combating corruption will strike at the heart of authoritarian state identity, just as decentralization challenges central governments and independent media can threaten government narratives. But public participation in budgeting and spending, independent oversight of government ministries by NGOs or international bodies, and public-private initiatives to improve the investment climate should be areas where the United States can help strengthen governance and citizen participation. Moreover, these are all areas beyond the current emphasis of the administration’s anti-corruption strategy in the Middle East and elsewhere, which focuses on countering illicit financial networks—a clearly

important effort, but one with a very different goal from improving governmental transparency and citizen rights. The U.S. government should provide clear Middle East examples of where it “is increasing support for civil society–led efforts to document and report on corruption in accordance with evidentiary support requirements for visa restrictions and sanctions mechanisms in the United States and internationally,” as the administration’s Strategy on Countering Corruption pledges.¹⁹ One opportunity is the following:

- **Prioritize public financial management and e-governance.** According to one Brookings Institution study about public-sector reform in the Middle East, the most successful programs have entailed financial management and not initiatives focused on upgrading human resources programs or specific service sectors.²⁰ In the three program years highlighted earlier—Egypt (2013), Jordan (2018), and Tunisia (2018)—only one program focused on public financial management: Jordan’s Fiscal Reform and Public Financial Management project, which led a revenue and tax modernization program as part of the kingdom’s reform efforts, guided by its ongoing IMF program. Efficiently raising revenue through tax reform is a critical but narrow focus. Given Jordan’s extensive assistance program with the United States, Washington should direct more of the kingdom’s significant ESF toward modernizing the government’s financial management. These programs should also be replicated. Investing in e-governance—simplifying the process of obtaining permits and documents and the like—may seem like an obvious goal. But it inherently challenges incumbents whose livelihoods depend on filling these roles, and bureaucrats often resist such change. Thus, any e-governance initiative must have a component providing prospects for alternative employment.

The Open Government Partnership (OGP) could

be another tool to assist with anti-corruption efforts in the Middle East. Started in 2011, the OGP has grown to include seventy-seven countries but only three from the Middle East: Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia. The initiative centers on voluntary commitments by these countries to increase transparency and responsiveness, but the commitments are unfunded and the incentives for fulfilling their action plans are thus limited. According to the OGP website:

Since joining the Open Government Partnership, Jordan (2011), Morocco (2018) and Tunisia (2014)—the three OGP country members in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region—have made over 129 commitments. These have included strong commitments on improving access to public information and open data, which can be effective transparency tools to hold the government to account. When it comes to implementing commitments, however, both Jordan and Tunisia fall behind other OGP members, and the results of Morocco’s first OGP action plan have yet to be assessed by the Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM).²¹

If the open government concept is to meaningfully expand transparency in the Middle East, it will need some modifications, in addition to leader-level political buy-in. To create action plans and necessary follow-up measures is a bureaucratically intensive process, and in systems with limited-quality bureaucratic capacity, those dedicated to the OGP are less available to implement other reform priorities. Therefore, the World Bank or other development bodies should partner with Middle East countries to assist in the development and implementation of their open government plans and provide financial pledges for reaching benchmarks. Further, without a financial incentive, it is hard to imagine that these

countries—or prospective new Middle East participants—will pursue their commitments more than incrementally.

Finally, to achieve better transparency outcomes, Washington needs to work with U.S. and local private-sector actors to determine the conditions needed to attract foreign direct investment (FDI), particularly from the United States. The economies of all Middle East countries have an imbalance between the public and private sectors as a legacy of statist economies and authoritarian regimes. Reforming investment laws, encouraging entrepreneurialism, and creating the conditions needed to attract foreign companies inherently improves transparency. As part of any focus on boosting transparency in the Middle East, Washington should direct more funding to the U.S. Development Finance Corporation, the Center of International Private Enterprise, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and other public-private initiatives focused on reforming investment laws and promoting FDI.

One thing is clear. The Middle East has become less free and fair since the uprisings of more than a decade ago. As a result, Washington needs to engage in genuine introspection not just about its policies toward the region but also, specifically, about its past efforts to support democracy and governance. To achieve true gains in these areas, the Biden administration and its successors will have to elevate issues of freedom, counter repression of individuals and groups, and encourage reforms in bilateral relationships. U.S.-funded projects should focus on areas that both promote freedoms and improve governance, thus evading the “trap” of focusing only on improving government functionality and ignoring citizen rights. Absent the pursuit of these difficult long-term objectives, the United States will, in effect, be contributing to a repeat of the tumult of 2011, only this time conducted by a larger, younger, more informed population that demands change and risks even greater instability in return.

NOTES

- 1 Two exceptions are Erin A. Snider, *Marketing Democracy: The Political Economy of Democracy Aid in the Middle East* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press: 2022), and Catherine Herrold, *Delta Democracy: Pathways to Incremental Civic Revolution in Egypt and Beyond* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).
- 2 This paper covers the Arab Middle East and North Africa, a classification that excludes democratic Israel, which does not receive economic support funds, as well as non-Arab Iran and Turkey.
- 3 Condoleezza Rice, “Remarks at the American University of Cairo,” June 20, 2005, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/48328.htm>.
- 4 Marwan Muasher, *The Arab Center: The Promise of Moderation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 242–43.
- 5 Author’s participation in the study, which is also described in Michael McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), and Ben Rhodes, *The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House* (New York: Random House, 2018).
- 6 Reuters, “U.S. to Give \$100 Million to Boost Tunisia Finances,” March 29, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-tunisia-usa-aid/u-s-to-give-100-million-to-boost-tunisia-finances-clinton-idUSBRE-82S0PB20120329>.
- 7 Worldwide Governance Indicators are composite findings reflecting ten to twenty sources, depending on the country and measurement. This paper uses the percentile rankings.
- 8 The other components of ESF are “investing in people,” which can include traditional development projects such as health or education programs; “economic growth,” which can include support for governments, infrastructure, or other macro-level economic support; and “humanitarian assistance,” oriented toward refugees and disaster relief.
- 9 Ben Fishman, “A Longer and Stronger Deal for Jordan,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy-Watch 3607, April 27, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/longer-and-stronger-deal-jordan>. In September 2022, the United States and Jordan signed a new seven-year, \$1.45-billion-per-year MOU through FY 2029. The distribution of these funds remains to be determined.
- 10 U.S. official, interview by author, May 6, 2022.
- 11 The dollar amounts in the following section and the categories of assistance in the budget reports come from the Project on Middle East Democracy, which itself compiled data from State Department Congressional Budget Justification reports. The specific program information is reported in ForeignAssistance.gov, a database of assistance spending maintained by USAID. This paper uses *disbursements* rather than *obligations*. Some differences in total figures can be attributed to multiyear programs paid in different years, or funds categorized differently by ForeignAssistance.gov and the budget justification (and POMED) documents, which do not align perfectly.
- 12 Office of Inspector General, *Survey of USAID’s Arab Spring Challenges in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen*, survey report 8-000-15-001-S (Frankfurt, Germany: U.S. Agency for International Development, 2015), <https://oig.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2018-06/8-000-15-001-s.pdf>.
- 13 No international monitoring teams observed Tunisia’s problematic July 25, 2022, constitutional referendum, which itself can be viewed as a condemnation of President Saïed’s power grab. Nevertheless, the absence of any outside expert commentary about the electoral process allows Saïed to maintain the fiction of a fair process.
- 14 Elliot Bulmer, *Local Democracy*, constitution-building primer (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2017), <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/local-democracy-primer.pdf>.
- 15 USAID professional, interview by author, May 2022. Erin Snider echoed this analysis in her book, *Marketing Democracy*.
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