

Democracy in the Middle East: Defining the Challenge

Aug 1, 1993



In-Depth Reports

The promotion of democracy abroad, long a major tenet of U.S. foreign policy, has taken on newfound importance in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse. President Clinton has promised to make the promotion of democracy a key element of his foreign policy. The Middle East, a region where autocratic regimes are the rule, has been largely untouched by the wave of democratization in recent years. Indeed, it may be the one area of the world where a key element of democracy, i.e., popular elections, may generate as many problems as it solves, especially if it results in the displacement of undemocratic yet friendly regimes by anti-Western Islamist forces which, once in power, may eliminate future elections and other facets of democracy -- in essence "one man, one vote, one time."

These ambiguities have led some analysts to conclude that the U.S. foreign policy ideal of promoting democracy abroad should not apply to the Middle East. Others argue that we should not give up on the democratic ideal but that it should be pursued cautiously or instituted only in stages.

To help further this discussion, The Washington Institute convened a panel of experts to discuss the feasibility, desirability and implications of promoting democratization in the Middle East and the problems and opportunities such a policy poses to U.S. interests in the region. These proceedings, together with the many documents gathered in the appendix to this volume, help define that challenge.

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