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The Summit for Democracy Skips the Arab World

by [Ben Fishman](#)

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Brief Analysis

To address the region's democracy gap, Washington needs to develop consistent messaging on reform objectives and help its partners focus on achievable goals such as protecting free speech, dissidents, and civil society.

On December 9-10, the Biden administration will host a virtual Summit for Democracy as an opportunity to showcase how governments can still deliver for citizens amid a global rise in autocracy and populism. Toward that end, participating nations will be asked to make commitments on combatting corruption, defending against authoritarianism, and promoting human rights, with a focus on initial measures that can be implemented ahead of an in-person summit in 2022 or 2023.

Notably, of the 110 countries invited from every region of the globe, only one was chosen from the Arab world. More than a decade after the Arab Spring, the summit is an indictment of that movement's failures and an acknowledgement of authoritarian resurgence and vitality in the Middle East. Israel is one of only two countries scheduled to attend from that region. The lone Arab invitee—Iraq—remains torn by constant civil conflict, while Tunisia was dropped from the list after President Kais Saied's [July power grab](#) shook up the region's best prospect for a healthy Arab constitutional democracy. Even so, the summit provides an opportunity for Washington and its democratic partners to recommit to fostering reform, good governance, individual freedoms, and human rights in the Middle East.

Quantifying a Poor Track Record

The shortcomings of Arab democratization have been well documented over the past twenty years. The landmark 2002 Arab Human Development Report cited limited political freedoms, a lack of female 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 judiciary independence, and advance the role of women in society. In doing so, they essentially acknowledged that external factors such as the Iraq war or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were not the source of the region’s troubles. Despite their ambitious agenda, very limited progress occurred in the years leading up to the 2011 uprisings.

After the initial enthusiasm of the Arab Spring protests, many governments responded with measures that were wholly or partly aimed at avoiding deep change, including further repression (Bahrain, Egypt), limited reform (Jordan, Morocco), or, worse, the outbreak of civil war (Libya, Syria, Yemen). In the past decade, only Tunisia took steps that improved its Freedom House score, with the exception of some early electoral events in Egypt and Libya shortly after the mass protest movements of 2011. Other countries have stagnated or even regressed—for instance, Egypt now ranks lower than it did during the last year of Hosni Mubarak’s rule.

The Freedom House numbers for the Middle East are even more stark when compared to the rest of the world. The organization scores countries on a scale of 100, awarding 1 to 40 points for performance on political rights and 1 to 60 points for civil liberties. For the period 2011-2021, the average score for Arab countries is just 27—and that number decreases to 25 without Tunisia’s outlier performance. Iraq, the Arab world’s sole representative to the Summit for Democracy, scored 29 this year, which the organization considers “Not Free.” In contrast, the global average score for 2021 was 56.

Freedom House Scores in the Middle East, 2011-2021

Country	2011	2012	2013	2020	2021
Algeria	36	35	34	34	32
Bahrain	30	20	18	11	12
Egypt	25	35	41	21	18
Iraq	25	25	25	31	29
Jordan	34	35	35	37	34
Kuwait	44	44	41	36	37
Lebanon	52	51	49	44	43
Libya	8	17	43	9	9
Morocco	42	43	42	37	37
Oman	27	27	26	23	23
Qatar	28	28	28	25	25
Saudi Arabia	12	10	10	7	7
Syria	9	6	5	0	1
Tunisia	23	58	59	70	71
United Arab Emirates	27	24	22	17	17
West Bank/Gaza	32/18	31/19	30/19	25/11	25/11
Yemen	29	23	25	11	11
Average Score	28	30	30	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.

Scholars have attributed the authoritarian resurgence since the Arab Spring to many factors: the specific traits of the region’s governments; their relationships with the security forces that protect them; the leaderless nature of many opposition movements; the fact that authorities were able to recapture much of the digital space used to organize the 2011 protests; the intervention of anti-democratic actors; and in some cases the breakdown into civil war. According to Freedom House, such factors have made the region as a whole 6 points less free than it was in 2013.

What Can Washington Do?

U. S. foreign policy will always face contradictions between interests and values, particularly in the Middle East, where many of the states that routinely violate human rights are the same ones that Washington relies on as partners for security, energy, and peace initiatives. The United States has two fundamental tools for mitigating these contradictions and pushing its values of reform, democracy, and human rights: (1) diplomacy, including public and private messaging; and (2) assistance programs to aid reformers, activists, and receptive governments.

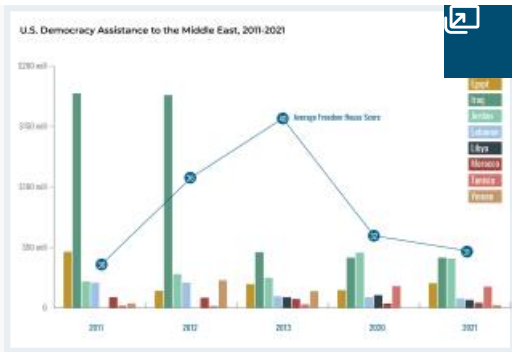
Reengage diplomatically. Just before the Arab Spring, Washington sought to emphasize the need for reform across the Middle East in order to address the bubbling demands of the region's citizens. As President Obama wrote in his memoir, "Under the emerging plan, U.S. officials across agencies would be expected to deliver a consistent and coordinated message on the need for reform; they would develop specific recommendations for liberalizing political and civic life in various countries and offer a range of new incentives to encourage their adoption." The key concept was consistency of messaging from all parts of the government, including the Defense Department and intelligence agencies, which are generally the least inclined to focus on reform issues because of the nature of their relationships with foreign actors. Yet these channels are often the most important because regional military and intelligence officials tend to be far more influential than diplomats. In any case, Obama's draft plan was soon superseded by crisis management, and a long-term focus on reform became implausible.

For the upcoming summit and its proposed "year of action," the United States should reengage on these issues by focusing on the most achievable goals. These include improving freedom of speech and protecting journalists and activists in partner countries—especially Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco, whose crackdowns have increased of late. Such improvements will require frequent, high-level messaging to senior regional officials noting that the administration cares about these issues.

A vocal contingent in Congress and the human rights community has called for using arms sales as leverage to compel progress on such matters. Yet there is little evidence that this approach translates into more freedoms, and it directly contradicts the Biden administration's overriding security objectives in the region—especially that of countering Iran's military encroachments, weapons proliferation, and other destabilizing activities. In the short timeframe before the next summit, a more effective and achievable approach would be to maintain consistency of messaging on country-specific goals related to free speech, civil society, and governance.

Reevaluate and increase assistance funding. Democracy assistance comprises a tiny fraction of U.S. foreign assistance, especially in the Middle East, where the majority of funding goes to the militaries of Egypt, Israel, and, to a lesser extent, Jordan and Iraq. In 2019, programs aimed at encouraging partners to "govern justly and democratically" comprised less than 3.5 percent of total U.S. assistance to the region—a ratio consistent with the 3.9 percent average seen from fiscal years 2003 to 2019. Over the same period, around 25 percent of non-security-related assistance was dedicated to democracy programs.

In total, the United States provided \$5.37 billion in democracy assistance to the region in 2003-2019, and \$1.9 billion after the Arab Spring. These programs were limited to ten recipients over the past decade: Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, and Yemen, along with Libya, Syria, and the West Bank/Gaza during certain periods. The remaining countries in the Middle East either refuse to accept such assistance or are too wealthy to legally receive it.



A future Washington Institute study will closely examine U.S. programs that support civil society organizations, elections, institutions such as legislatures and municipalities, and more. Yet for the purposes of this week’s summit, and in light of the region’s track record, it is quite clear that the contents of these programs need to be reevaluated. Moreover, the actual overlap between good governance, economic reforms, and democracy in the Middle East should be scrutinized. The administration wants to demonstrate that democracies can deliver by emphasizing the importance of anti-corruption efforts. Yet the United Arab Emirates and Qatar have the highest scores in the Middle East—and among the highest globally—on Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index, even though they remain two of the region’s least free countries.

To address these contradictions and the Middle East’s general democracy gap, the United States should develop consistent messages on reform objectives over the next year, helping its regional partners focus initially on protecting free speech, dissidents, and civil society. Washington should also evaluate democracy assistance programs and expand them appropriately. And when the second Summit for Democracy convenes, the goal should be to include more than one Arab state.

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