Why Support of Arab Democrats Is in the U.S. National Interest

by J. Scott Carpenter **(/experts/j-scott-carpenter)**

Jan 30, 2011

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

J. Scott Carpenter (/experts/j-scott-carpenter)

J. Scott Carpenter is an adjunct fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Articles & Testimony

In December 2008, J. Scott Carpenter published a Washington Institute Strategic Report, Views of Arab Democrats, in which he distilled advice from Arab democrats to the newly elected Obama administration. The recent turmoil in Egypt points to the timeliness of this report, particularly the chapter addressing whether U.S. support of Arab prodemocracy efforts is in U.S. national interests.

Encouraging the Obama administration to advance democracy in the Middle East is not making an argument that doing so would be in our national interest. Indeed, within the Washington policymaking community a growing consensus suggests that the promotion of democracy in the Middle East is not in the national interest -- that promoting democracy puts the United States at odds with the states of the region, inhibiting our ability to pursue our "true" national security interests: protecting Israel, safeguarding the flow of oil, challenging Iran, and stabilizing Iraq.

This argument misses the central point and, in any case, is out of step with the Middle East of the early twenty-first century. During the Cold War decades, the United States pursued a "realist" policy of safeguarding to varying degrees the core interests listed above. But in doing so, it ignored how America's allies within the region failed to develop their economies even as they became increasingly repressive. As a consequence, al-Qaeda's global narrative resonated with an Arab public looking for excuses to explain the failure of their societies to evolve in the roughly six decades since independence. Ultimately, this inattention contributed to September 11. Today, the region as a whole swims in a sea of social pathology that will yield to no easy or short-term solutions, especially if long-term solutions are not pursued now. In short, a foreign policy of pursuing national interests, as realists have narrowly defined them, has failed.

Thus a policy of promoting political and economic reform in the Middle East is designed not to replace our core national interests, but to balance them with the need to create a fundamental stability in the region for the long term. The Bush administration was the first to add these issues to the agenda with the governments of the region; however, it ultimately found the trauma of Iraq and the temptation to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict too difficult to overcome. But the reform agenda is now a recognized option for the region and it will not go away. The Obama administration will have no choice but to assist Middle Eastern governments with their efforts to modernize. The question is whether the new administration will also insist that the governments do so in a manner that protects human, civil, and political rights.

A process of democratization also contributes to countering radicalization, albeit indirectly. Ultimately, defeating extremism requires providing myriad alternatives for young people, particularly young men in the region who are frustrated because they have few opportunities for a better, more-advanced education and a job, not to mention a career. Many youths in the region today cannot contemplate the prospect of moving out of their parents' home and getting married. They feel in so little control of their lives that they are particularly susceptible to extremist ideology with a convenient worldview that explains their current circumstances: the United States, Israel, and (more broadly) the West are in league with their own corrupt governments in a war on Islam that is designed to keep Muslims down. Regional microprojects of vocational training, English language classes, cultural exchanges, and the like are all means of countering

this virulent worldview, but institutional reform is the most durable solution.

Pursuing economic and political reform begins to create alternative opportunities as transparency and accountability (usually in the form of a free press) accelerate official reform initiatives. Political scientists tell us that healthy societies tend to be governed from the center, with small tails representing the extremes. By working with governments and societies in the region to democratize, the United States seeks to foster such healthy societies. Much like the countries of Latin America after the "third wave" of democratization, the resulting societies are not necessarily friendly to the United States, but they are not instantly hostile to it either. Citizens in such societies are much more preoccupied with improving their own day-to-day lives than with destroying ours.

As evidenced in the preceding summary of the Amman dialogue with Arab democrats, a secondary question always arises whenever one considers how or whether the United States should push for greater political openness in the region: what does the United States do about political Islamism? That religious parties can be a part of democracy has been definitively answered in countries as diverse as Israel, Indonesia, and India, the latter two having the largest Muslim populations in the world. However, in the Middle East, the history and teachings of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Algeria's bitter experience during the "lost decade," raise the perennial fear that allowing Islamists to participate in the political process may cause the state to be suborned from the inside. This fear is typically reflected in the phrase quoted earlier: "One man, one vote -- one time."

As indicated in the summary of the Amman dialogue, Islamism represents a powerful and abiding political current within most countries in the region. It cannot be constrained by force. A number of countries, including Morocco, Yemen, Jordan, and Bahrain, allow Islamist parties to participate in the political process. So far, they are participating peacefully within the bounds of the system, believing their participation will ultimately lead to a sharing of power. For the United States, then, the focus should not be on whether Islamists can participate politically but on whether the political system is sufficiently open to allow others to compete with them. If viable political alternatives cannot provide enough competition, the tide of Islamism may rise irreversibly. The salient point here is that the United States should be unwavering in its focus on pluralism and always look to institutional solutions rather than relying on a given state's willingness or ability to repress its citizens....

Regarding elections in the region more generally, the Obama administration should reiterate in its "vision of democracy that goes beyond the ballot box" that elections themselves do not a democracy make. Democratic institutions, beginning with a free press but also including powerful legislatures, independent judiciaries, and NGOs, are essential for creating a healthy, sustainable democratic society. Yet the question remains open as to how to establish effectively and sustain such institutions. Some can be established through executive fiat, but most others will evolve. Here, elections -- the sine qua non for a democracy -- prove critical. Elections mediate citizen demand for such institutions and contribute to transparency and accountability within them. Wherever they take place -- which is almost everywhere in the region today -- the United States should come out clearly and firmly for continued improvement in the electoral process. The system will not be perfect in most cases; indeed, our own system has never been perfect. Nonetheless, the trajectory toward greater openness should be assessed with each iteration of the process.

As elections become more accurately representative of the people's will, the United States should also be clear with the people of the region that electing leaders does not automatically mean that the United States will be on good terms with the resulting government. We are a nation of interests, and while we can respect the will of a society to elect whomever it wants to elect, every country continues to have rights as well as responsibilities in the international system. As perhaps the most active player in that system, the United States has expectations that every party in power will abide by the international "rules of the game." A country can choose to play by these rules or not, but when they do not, there will be consequences that have nothing to do with whether the United States "accepts the results" of a given election. An extreme example of this was the election of Adolf Hitler as chancellor of the Weimar Republic. The United States and other world nations recognized that Hitler's election represented the clear will of the German people, and yet his policies in Europe quickly became unacceptable to the rest of the international community. Other such examples abound in recent history.

J. Scott Carpenter is the Keston Family fellow at The Washington Institute and director of ***Project Fikra (/templateI02.php?SID=24&newActiveSubNav=Project%20Fikra&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D24&newActiveNav=researchPrograms)*** *, which focuses on empowering Arab democrats in their struggle against extremism.* ❖

Views of Arab Democrats

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology

Feb 11, 2022

◆

Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Egypt (/policy-analysis/egypt)