

What Arab Democrats Want from Our Next President

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Mohamed Abdelbaky is a Keston visiting fellow for The Washington Institute's [Project Fikra \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/template02.php?SID=24&newActiveSubNav=Project%20Fikra&activeSubNavLink=template02.php%3FSID%3D24&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/template02.php?SID=24&newActiveSubNav=Project%20Fikra&activeSubNavLink=template02.php%3FSID%3D24&newActiveNav=researchPrograms), focusing on economic and political reform, democracy, governance, and youth development in the Middle East. He is also a diplomatic correspondent covering Middle East and North Africa (MENA) affairs for the



In-Depth Reports

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On September 20, 2008, J. Scott Carpenter, Mohamed Abdelbaky, Oussama Safa, Engi El-Haddad, and Nader Said addressed The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference. Mr. Carpenter is a Keston Family fellow at the Institute and director of its [Project Fikra \(/template02.php?SID=24&newActiveSubNav=Project%20Fikra&activeSubNavLink=template02.php%3FSID%3D24&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/template02.php?SID=24&newActiveSubNav=Project%20Fikra&activeSubNavLink=template02.php%3FSID%3D24&newActiveNav=researchPrograms).

Mr. Abdelbaky is foreign affairs editor for Akher Saa and a visiting fellow with Human Rights First. Mr. Safa is general director of the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, a think tank based in Beirut. Ms. El-Haddad, a strategy and communications consultant, is cofounder of Shayfeen.com, the Afro-Egyptian Human Rights Organization, and Egyptians Against Corruption. Mr. Said is president of Arab World for Research and Development and team leader for the UN's Palestine Human Development Report.

The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

J. Scott Carpenter

This year, The Washington Institute's [Project Fikra \(/template02.php?SID=24&newActiveSubNav=Project%20Fikra&activeSubNavLink=template02.php%3FSID%3D24&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/template02.php?SID=24&newActiveSubNav=Project%20Fikra&activeSubNavLink=template02.php%3FSID%3D24&newActiveNav=researchPrograms)

launched a Presidential Task Force to make recommendations on ways to combat radical extremism in the broader Middle East. Yet a missing element of the task force thus far has been the perspective of the region's people -- specifically, their thoughts on the likely policies, expectations, and desires of the next U.S. administration. Such a perspective is vital, for the governments, private sectors, and nongovernmental sectors in the United States and Europe have to find partners among those who are involved in changing their societies; otherwise, the West's efforts to combat extremism and thus bolster its security will ultimately be undermined. We must ask these putative participants what they want -- or don't want -- from future Western governmental policies, their thoughts on Muslim youth and on how to engage Islamists in constructive futures for these youth, and their perceptions of democracy and its basic meaning in their lives.

Such a dialogue raises four critical points for the next administration: First, the demographic predominance of youth in the Arab world must be acknowledged and addressed in U.S. policy, for this sector will eventually decide on the region's new political leaders. Second, democratization efforts should be country-specific and accommodate the richness and diversity of the region; once established, democratic rule should be consistently applied, with direct and sincere acknowledgment of opposing interests. Third, to attract public support, democratization efforts must strive to produce tangible results -- economically and otherwise -- in peoples' daily lives at all levels of the socioeconomic scale. Fourth, the United States should be supporting -- rather than leading -- locals already engaged in these efforts.

Mohamad Abdelbaky

In the Middle East, 63 percent of the population is under the age of 25 -- the region's highest percentage of youth ever. Their vast numbers mean that they compete for dwindling opportunities for employment and civic participation, contributing to the growth of radical extremism. In a world where secularism and civil society are either weak, nonexistent, or offer few opportunities for political expression and personal development, Islam becomes a powerful alternative. At the same time, a growing segment of the region's youth has created an alternative, virtual political community, using the internet to promote democracy: To date, Egypt has 180,000 blogs, representing 40 percent of Arabic-language social networks, and these young Egyptian bloggers have been successful in mobilizing their cohorts to demonstrate against the government. Facebook groups and YouTube videos instruct youth throughout the Middle East on how to be political activists; form prodemocracy groups; and raise awareness about sensitive political issues, such as human rights violations. The Bush administration's efforts throughout the Middle East to promote democracy and empower women have lacked an explicit focus on youth, thus bypassing an opportunity to tap into this vast reserve of political and social activism in the majority of the Middle East's population. Hence, the next U.S. administration should make the empowerment of Arab youth a top priority in its regional democratization programs.

Oussama Safa

As it begins to formulate its new foreign policy orientation toward the Middle East, the next U.S. administration should rely on some critical lessons from the past seven years. Foremost, it will have to clarify the ambivalence about regional democratization that was fostered by the policy of waging war in the name of peace. Yet such efforts at clarification will be challenging because of the serious policy coordination and communication problems among Middle Eastern governments, and between state and nonstate actors throughout the region -- including Islamists, Arab prodemocratic political leaders, and nongovernmental organizations. These lessons suggest that U.S. foreign policy in the region should be crafted and conducted with patience and consistency. Specifically, democracy promotion efforts should not adopt a short-term perspective; rather, they should incorporate long-term political, economic, and social indicators designed by the reformers in the region. To be sure, the United States needs to adopt a consistent regional strategy that applies the same unwavering commitments to all Middle Eastern countries, albeit one that is tailored to the specific needs and challenges in each state.

Fostering more structures for intraregional collaboration would also ease pressure on the United States and encourage local solutions. The United States must clarify its attitude toward local elections, support social and political change in the region, and avoid credibility problems that undermine the work of Arab democrats. In formulating and pursuing its regional policies in the Middle East, the United States should make an effort to incorporate local public opinion -- especially informed criticism -- to broaden the appeal of such policies among more relevant publics in the Middle East.

Engi El-Haddad

Arab democrats are becoming extinct, struggling to survive in the narrow passage between autocratic governments, on the one side, and Islamists, on the other. Although each side should

be supporting these political reformers as an alternative to the other side's opposing ranks, the intentional or unintentional result of the political status quo during the past few years has been the steadily fading appeal of the few Arab democrats who remain. The inconsistent policy of democracy promotion -- launching programs and then canceling them prematurely -- has eroded these reformers' base of support, undermining the capacity and sacking the aspirations of the political leaders who have stepped forward in their support. What changes in U.S. foreign policy in the region can prevent the imminent extinction of Arab democrats?

Democracy promotion in the Middle East should be a priority among U.S. foreign policy goals, because it creates the necessary politically moderate alternative to a potentially violent and protracted power vacuum effected when autocratic regimes eventually exit the political scene. Of course, the United States will always have superseding foreign policy interests and goals, yet it should be honest about them and promise only what it will be able to deliver. The ongoing debate over "sequencing" in democracy promotion has continually underemphasized the establishment of the rule of law before the conduct of elections and the reform or design of governing institutions. The intangible ideas of democracy, which are incomprehensible to many people in the Middle East, must be connected to the very real need for economic prosperity by providing the rule of law, eradicating corruption, and ensuring social justice. Such a connection could be forged by linking foreign aid to the recipient government's demonstrated commitment to anticorruption laws rather than to human rights alone -- as the latter approach tends to focus criticism on no one but the human rights activists themselves. Washington needs to help provide the political space for the Arab democrats to grow, which may mean turning the spotlight away from them in order to preserve their credibility in the community or to deflect attention from the government.

The United States should not engage with Islamists -- that is a critical role that the Arab democrats could and should fill. U.S. engagement with Islamists would only serve to seriously undercut the Arab democrats and give credibility and power to the Islamists, who have not demonstrated the kind of inclusiveness and transparency that are the hallmarks of democratic rule. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is a telling example: despite the Brotherhood's popular appeal on the street as a viable political alternative, it revealed the more problematic and nondemocratic aspects of its platform when it faced demands to publish a charter containing specific political goals.

Nader Said

Democracy promotion is an interaction of values and ideologies that must take both the international and the Arab context into account. Accordingly, future efforts should eschew the overly idealistic and overbearing approach of the past, which treated democratization in the Middle East as if it were a social engineering project. U.S. efforts to promote democracy in the region have lacked rhetorical clarity in their articulation and suffered from double standards in their application -- for example, using overwhelming force in Iraq and not exerting an equivalent degree of effort in attempting to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian issue, a key priority for those in the region. The creation of an aid bureaucracy has also harmed democracy promotion, diverting money away from the actual programs on the ground and toward centralized administrative offices far away from the programs' officers and intended recipients. These fundamental problems in U.S. democracy-promotion programs have caused Arab democrats to distance themselves from the Bush administration's democratization efforts in the region. Simultaneously, there has been a sharpening of the development crisis in the Arab world that has created further disillusionment about democracy's ability to deliver prosperity and greater dissatisfaction with Arab governments' inability to cater to their citizens. These twin developments suggest strongly that democracy promotion can no longer consist of short-term, disconnected projects but, rather, must be undertaken in a concerted, integrated effort across all aspects of society. To be sure, the next U.S. administration must take a holistic approach in its regional democracy-promotion policies and programs. Such an approach would augur more inclusiveness in terms of not only socioeconomic interests but also political forces -- Islamists, leftists, opposition, and government. ❖

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