

# Democracy Promotion in the Middle East:

## Time for a Plan B?

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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### Brief Analysis

On December 4, 2006, Jennifer Windsor, Carl Gershman, and Martin Kramer addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Jennifer Windsor is executive director of Freedom House and also a member of the Secretary of State's Advisory Commission. Carl Gershman is president of the National Endowment of Democracy and a member of the Secretary of State's Advisory Commission on Democracy Promotion. Martin Kramer is a Wexler-Fromer fellow at the Institute and author of *[Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle East Studies in America \(templateC04.php?CID=142\)](templateC04.php?CID=142)*. The prepared remarks of Mr. Gershman and Mr. Kramer were previously posted online. Read them [here \(templateC07.php?CID=315\)](templateC07.php?CID=315). The following is a rapporteur's summary of Ms. Windsor's remarks and of the question-and-answer session.

### JENNIFER WINDSOR

Troubling and profound incursions on human rights and fundamental freedoms occur in the Middle East. However, there is a tendency to sometimes focus on just a few countries, declaring their story to be that of an entire region. Freedom House's most recent annual survey of freedom trends in the Middle East found that, in some places, the region has actually made small movements forward in the protection of certain fundamental freedoms. Most of its gains, though extremely modest, are in areas affected by the increased flow of information in the region, such as that generated by satellite television. Instability does not always have negative consequences. It may help the Middle East move in a positive direction.

What is the cause of such progress? It can be argued that when a U.S. president takes a strong stand about the importance of human rights in a region, even those who hate America will listen and care. Another factor could be the broader internal incentives for change in the Middle East, including worries over burgeoning discontent within the region's societies.

The rise of antidemocratic movements that embrace violence, but are still allowed to participate in politics, is a serious cause of concern. The balance of power in some Middle Eastern societies is becoming unsteady, and that can motivate parties to act in brutal ways to take advantage of this imbalance, either to acquire more power or to

perpetuate their current hold on power. Extremists are strong, while moderate democratic forces are just trying to steady themselves. Extremists have the added benefit of decades during which they were able to build their organizations and social service networks without having to pay attention to elections.

There is also tremendous anti-Americanism, which owes much to decades of distorted information flows in the region. While the promotion of democracy is not greatly reducing these anti-American sentiments, maintaining the status quo will not help.

The United States has not pursued a strategy of putting democracy promotion first in Iraq; it has given more priority to other interests such as delaying elections and waiting for a constitutional process. U.S. government data show that at the height of elections in Iraq and Afghanistan, only a small percentage of U.S. assistance to those countries went toward the promotion of democracy. Efforts to promote democracy have been hurt by much-publicized U.S. detention and interrogation techniques, which were devastating to the American image in the region.

The U.S. government is not necessarily the best agent for all aspects of democracy promotion. However, while it may fail at several tasks, ignoring the promotion of democracy -- as Washington did for many decades -- is also not the way forward. When it is perceived that the United States does not care and will not put any diplomatic weight behind this project, the work of nongovernmental organizations can be undermined.

Freedom of identity is an essential element of democracy and a basic component of the concept of freedom. People should be free to choose their identity -- whether religious, ethnic, linguistic, or regional. This aspect of democracy promotion needs to be given more priority.

For the future, the United States -- working in concert with European actors -- needs to do a better job of reading the signs of what is going on in the Middle East. It must be able to assess what is happening in each country and locate the forces of reform. And it must find ways, through trade and economic assistance, to give reformers an incentive to transform their societies.

CARL GERSHMAN

The United States needs to be able to deal with Middle East issues without obsessing over them in a way that interferes with its other global commitments. There has to be a bipartisan agreement on a manageable approach that can work in the long term -- meaning for generations.

Stable, liberal democracy is a defense against extremism; however, the process of getting there can be very difficult and very unsettling to a lot of people. There is no alternative to going down that path, but there should be no illusions about the difficulties along the route. That said, opportunities will emerge as political systems change. As the political process opens up, divisions will emerge among groups that once appeared united. There will be hardline Islamists who try to destroy the new democratic process and others who want to take advantage of it. The appropriate policy must be to try to engage people who want to move in the right direction.

The United States has set the bar much too low on which candidates can run in elections. There has to be a core principle that participation in elections is only open to those who have renounced violence. Movements with armed wings or militias create problems and can compromise the whole political process. The price of admission to the election process has to be disarmament.

One of the most interesting and attractive elements of American society to the Arab world is how the United States has dealt with its Arab and Muslim communities. Organizations such as the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy mobilize Arab and Muslim populations in the United States to advocate for American values and democracy abroad. The Muslim and Arab minorities of Europe have been unable to carry Europe's message to the Arab world. The United States needs to find a way to strengthen the message from its Muslim and Arab residents.

MARTIN KRAMER

In the Bush administration's remaining months in office, Iraq seems likely to overshadow all other concerns. The help of Arab allies -- Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt -- would be of considerable utility. It could be argued that the United States has deprived itself of their assistance in its zeal to sacrifice them in the name of the noble principle of democracy. The irony here is that, although much of the U.S. democracy rhetoric was aimed at Iran and Syria, the overall template has had the effect of delegitimizing the entire regional order. The first step in rebuilding these alliances, already in place, is to downplay this policy dimension.

Especially in the Fertile Crescent region, the issue of freedom of identity is most acute. There needs to be a basic distinction in the region between homogenous societies and diverse societies -- and different rules will apply to each. The notion of freedom of identity cannot be applied indiscriminately, because in some places it might make things worse and contradict U.S. interests.

The Arab world was long protected from the West by the shield of the Ottoman Empire. When it finally came into contact with the West, it went through a relatively short imperial period. Now the state system in parts of the Middle East is coming under tremendous pressure. Iraq is of course the prime example, but similar processes may begin elsewhere. Some of the borders now printed on maps could become so weak as to become virtual; other lines may become actual borders. Although the United States has consistently been committed to maintaining existing borders, it may not have the power to do so.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Steven Leibowitz. ❖

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