

# A Policy for Promoting Liberal Democracy in Egypt

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Articles & Testimony

**H**ala Mustafa is editor-in-chief of the Egyptian political quarterly al-Dimuqratiya (Democracy) and Keston Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute. The following is an excerpt from the conclusion of her article. [Download the complete text \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/opedsPDFs/4468918898f8d.pdf\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/opedsPDFs/4468918898f8d.pdf) of the paper in PDF format.

## The United States Must Revise Its Approach to Democracy Promotion

America's traditional approach to promoting democracy in the Middle East has been based on two pillars: supporting civil society and pushing for "free and fair" elections. Both of these strategies have shown very limited results on a practical level, especially in Egypt. While the first strategy is appropriate for some Arab countries, it does not necessarily fit Egypt, because of the central and controlling role of the state, and the interference of the state security apparatus in political life which prevents civil society activists from leading a reform process and making any major progress from within. Likewise, reducing democracy to the ballot box in Egypt has unfairly empowered just one political power -- the Islamists -- without giving an equal chance to other political groups to be represented. This is unquestionably the result of the tight constraints the regime imposes on these secular political groups.

The right approach must begin with direct pressure on the regime to liberalize the political system and the media. Until this is done, the impact of current reform efforts by the United States and the international community will remain limited, and the burgeoning reform process risks grinding to a halt, jeopardizing the steps that have already been taken. U.S. strategy should focus on strengthening liberal democrats, not just the democratic process, and should focus on the following priorities:

- Constitutional reform to emphasize liberal and secular principles.
- Legal reform to open up the political system.
- Reshape the political elite.
- Open up and liberalize the media.
- Empower women.
- Revise the role of the security apparatus in political life.

The policy recommended in this paper is not revolutionary, but rather consists of a realistic approach for transforming the regime from within by promoting liberal ideas and figures in Egyptian politics. This has the potential not only to change Egypt's internal political situation, but would also enable Egypt to pave the way for a regional transformation towards a more open, moderate, stable, and peaceful environment.

On a regional level, the stagnant political environment that prevailed for decades has been broken, and there is currently a momentum for change throughout the entire Middle East. Discourse and debate on political reform is at its peak, both internally and externally.

For years, Palestinian-Israeli peace has remained unachievable, and the recent ascendance of Hamas casts new doubt on the prospect for peace. The situation in Iraq is unstable, Syria presents a greater challenge than before, and Arab satellite states are at the peak of radicalizing viewers. All of these factors necessitate a moderate state in the region with a more sophisticated agenda, one which could serve as a cornerstone for promoting a liberal, moderate discourse. Egypt has the potential to play this leading role, and to this give real meaning and effectiveness to the American strategy of fostering democracy in the Middle East. . . .

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