

Democracy in Arab Countries:

Problems and Prospects

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Jan 15, 2004

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



Articles & Testimony

After pan-Arabism and Islamism, it is heartening to consider the prospect that democracy may be the next great wave to wash over Arab countries. Whether it actually takes root or is merely a passing fancy depends on three sets of actors: local leaders, local populations, and what is euphemistically referred to as "the international community."

The most difficult hurdle is that democracy needs democrats, as United States President George Bush noted recently in London, and Arab democrats are weak and fragmented. Though they can agree on what they are against--e.g., their opposition to radical Islamism--they are divided on what they are for. That does not even address the complicating factor of Islamists who mouth the democratic line and want entry into the big democratic tent but who are the most fundamentally anti-democratic element in the region.

This problem is exacerbated by the harsh political realities facing many Arab democrats. In many countries, those who have openly opposed the regime have earned the wrath of the state and have suffered accordingly. At the same time there are many who, for nationalistic or ideological reasons, refuse to truck with the United States, the leading outside power advocating democracy in the Middle East today, thereby depriving themselves of a major source of support. The number of democrats who have found a way to be effective locally while taking advantage of the benefits that association with Washington has to offer is exceedingly small.

A second major problem is that even the most forward-looking leaders in the Middle East are, at best, liberals, not democrats. (Ironically, these are virtually all monarchs--such as the kings of Morocco, Jordan and Bahrain--who have generally shown fewer monarchical pretensions than leaders of the region's republics.) The reforms enacted by these innovative kings, substantive and revolutionary as they have been, have largely been liberal reforms (such as expanding women's rights and enhancing press freedom), implemented through top-down, authoritarian means (e.g., royal decrees, appointments of palace favorites as prime ministers). None has shown any real taste for the diffusion of power that is a key element of democracy. Perhaps this is necessary; liberalism, after all, is usually a way-station on the road to democracy. But, one should note, passing through a liberal stage does not necessarily mean that democracy is the next stop.

A third major problem is that the "international community" is deeply divided both on the merits of Arab democracy and how to achieve it. The United States, which once championed stability as the cornerstone of its Middle East policy, has now, at least in principle, discarded that policy in favor of radical, though evolutionary, change. For its part Europe, which used to enjoy castigating Washington for its insouciant approach to human rights, now finds itself the purveyor of stability as the governing principle of relations with Arabs, largely because strong governments on the southern Mediterranean, regardless of their domestic political orientation, will (it is assumed) stem the influx of illegal refugees--Europe's foremost concern--more effectively than fractious democracies.

International actors differ on the means of promoting democracy, too. The United States has shown itself able to overthrow one major Arab dictator (in Baghdad) and has pressed for the isolation of a minor one, a recidivist obstacle to peace (in Ramallah); however, Washington has been less sure-footed in helping empower locals--Iraqis and Palestinians--to replace those tyrannies with representative government. At the same time, there is even less likelihood that the paths ostensibly preferred by leading members of the "international community"--enhancing the United Nations' role, in the case of Iraq; imposing peace in the Israeli-Palestinian context--would improve the chances of democracy in either case.

Despite these obstacles, optimism is warranted. The silver lining in Bin Ladinism is that it has concentrated the attention of disparate elements of society on the need for political change. Not all of this will be democratic change, but much of it is moving in that direction. While the region's powerhouses--like Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Algeria--are either too fearful or too preoccupied to act, change is coming in smaller countries, rarely before viewed as regional trendsetters. That is good news, both for the changes underway and for the fact that it suggests the decline of the monolithic grip large states have on the region's political culture.

A second positive trend is how various countries are beginning to grapple with issues of pluralism and religious-ethnic diversity. For example, in the west, Morocco is addressing demands for Berber cultural rights in new and mature ways; in the east, Iraq is only one of a number of Gulf countries responding to the demands of indigenous Shiites for more representation and a greater say in political affairs.

The bellwether of democratic change is, undoubtedly, Iraq; it is also where the United States will focus its effort and resources for the foreseeable future. Media-reportage notwithstanding, Iraq is largely a glass-half-full story; the main problem has been security--i.e., the insurgency--not the pace at which local Iraqis have begun to reassert themselves politically after a generation of cruelly enforced silence. In the other venue where the US has invested its prestige on the side of change, the Palestinian territories, the situation is more disappointing. But even there, the good news is that Arabs throughout the region seem much less willing to let themselves be led, ideologically speaking, by a Palestinian pied piper, as was the case in years past.

Among the many wild cards is whether the United States, having chucked the rhetoric of "stability," will change its de facto policy toward the region's "friendly authoritarians." Given the stakes in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Washington is unlikely to risk getting too far ahead of local leaders. But there are other countries, like Tunisia, where the United States could be more bullish without substantial risk to US interests. And toward the Palestinians, one could argue that it was, in part, Washington's hesitancy to follow through on demands for change, after having the constructive audacity to make such demands in the first place, that gave birth to the current unhappy situation.

Robert Satloff is director of policy and strategic planning at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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