

The State Department's 'No Dominoes' Report and Prospects for Democratization in a Post-Saddam Middle East

by [Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Mar 17, 2003

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Patrick Clawson is Morningstar senior fellow and director of research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.



Brief Analysis

According to a classified report drafted by the State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) and leaked to the Los Angeles Times on March 14, overthrowing Saddam Husayn will not lead to a wave of successful democratic revolutions against Middle Eastern autocracies. Numerous press accounts describe the report -- titled "Iraq, the Middle East, and Change: No Dominoes" -- as "pouring scorn" on Bush administration policy. In fact, the INR report meshes with administration policy, which is to seek political liberalization of existing regimes first, avoiding the radicalism of "overnight democracy" schemes.

Revolution or Reform?

Democracy will not come to the post-Saddam Arab world the way it did to post-Soviet Eastern Europe, in a sudden wave made possible by a single transformative event. No Bush administration official has claimed that the Arab world will be swept by popular revolutions overthrowing existing regimes. Yet, political liberalization could come to the Middle East after Saddam, especially if the U.S. government vigorously promotes it. The U.S. goal would be to open, strengthen, and thereby improve Washington's authoritarian friends, rather than replace them. Such an approach fits well with U.S. interests, balancing progress toward democracy with the need to preserve stability. Washington can credibly argue that expanding the scope of political participation is in the interests of its undemocratic Arab allies, even though they may pay a short-term price in the form of more openly expressed discontent. For instance, Washington stands on solid ground in urging the Saudi regime to provide a more accountable and transparent government that allows for the expression of disagreement within the framework of the political process; the alternative would be a false tranquility, with radical forces gaining strength in the shadows.

The risks of radicalism stemming from the Arab "democracy deficit" are hardly theoretical. Practically speaking, the U.S. drive to promote Arab political liberalization dates from September 11, 2001, when Americans paid an exorbitant price in part because Arab regimes had long refused to provide meaningful channels of popular discontent other than exporting their extremists abroad. On that day, Washington jettisoned its past belief that only "friendly tyrants" could make peace with Israel (e.g., Egypt's Anwar Sadat, Jordan's King Hussein) and that free elections, prematurely held, could bring to power radical anti-Western Islamists -- a common reading of the 1991 Algerian elections.

A gradual approach to democratization makes sense, based on the lessons of history. During the 1990s, some countries of the former Soviet Union attempted to hold elections in the absence of strong civil society institutions (e.g., free press, political parties, active political debate), which only reinforced the power of autocrats. In the Middle East, the objective will be to emphasize the need for local regimes to develop the building blocks of democratization while avoiding the mistake of pushing for premature radical change. True democracy rarely comes in one fell swoop. The "Jeffersonian democracy" that Americans are so proud of sanctioned slavery and restricted voting to male property owners; women did not achieve suffrage until more than 140 years after the Declaration of Independence.

The winds of political reform are already beginning to stir in the Middle East. The most interesting and important case is Saudi Arabia. In January 2003, 104 Saudis -- mostly intellectuals, many quite conservative -- sent Crown Prince Abdullah a "National Reform Document" calling for "more steps in building a country of constitutional institutions" (e.g., parliamentary elections, economic reform) and "strengthening the internal front" (via measures such as enhancing the role of women and expanding freedom of speech). Previous, more tentative efforts of this nature resulted in media attacks and government harassment against the signatories. This time, however, Abdullah's response was to meet with thirty-four of the signatories and then to issue his own "Charter for Arab Reform." Although this may reflect an attempt to co-opt and control reform as much as to advance it, it is nevertheless a signal that regional rulers are aware of the need to respond to popular demands for change differently than they have in the past. Moreover, the Crown Prince's initiative comes at a time when Washington has yet to make liberalization a key facet of its bilateral dialogue with Riyadh.

How Much Reform?

Progress toward liberalization in Arab countries will depend more on developments in Iraq than on any other factor. Significant Iraqi advances toward more representative government would influence the Arab world profoundly. Yet, if Iraq becomes mired in instability or if the United States remains in de facto control over the country for a lengthy period, then Washington's talk of democracy will appear disingenuous. Another major risk is that political reform in the region will follow the same path as economic reform has in past decades: Washington presses hard, local governments loudly proclaim their fealty to the reform process, and not much changes. If the post-Saddam transformation of Iraq unfolds well and a more open government and civil society emerge with U.S. support, then many governments will begin to claim that they are following this path as well, even if they are not in fact doing so.

The Special Case of Iran

Iran is different from its Arab neighbors in part because democracy has caught hold of the popular imagination there. Intellectual life in Iran is dominated by debates about how democracy should work (e.g., whether it should be entirely secular or in some way Islamic). The people are profoundly dissatisfied with the small group that holds power. Although experts on Iran do not expect a revolution there anytime soon, the general rule is that experts cannot predict revolutions, even in a country such as Iran, which has a long tradition of mass popular movements (e.g., the 1906-11 Constitutional Revolution, the 1951-53 Mossadegh era, the 1977-80 Islamic Revolution). Nevertheless, the general mood in Iran currently seems apolitical, as most Iranians are preoccupied with daily life rather than political freedom; hence, the experts' pessimism about short-term change in Iran may be well placed.

Bush Democracy Strategy: A Realistic Approach

Contrary to the frenzied worries of many critics who fear a grand design to reshape Middle Eastern politics, the Bush administration's stated plans to promote Arab liberalization remain modest. In a December 12, 2002, speech, Secretary of State Colin Powell introduced the Middle East Partnership Initiative, which includes a variety of interesting, useful, but small programs whose purpose is to "close the freedom gap with projects to strengthen civil society, expand political participation, and lift the voices of women."

Indeed, the key factor in U.S. democratization policy will likely be the president's willingness to emphasize to Arab leaders the importance of political liberalization. His rhetoric on the issue has been more modest than press reports suggest. In his 2002 State of the Union speech, the president spoke of U.S. support for "the rule of law; limits on the power of the state; respect for women; private property; free speech; equal justice; and religious tolerance" -- but not of democracy. In his February 26, 2003, speech at the American Enterprise Institute, he offered the restrained statement that Iraq "is fully capable of moving towards democracy and living in freedom." Indeed, the White House already seems to have recognized the validity of the INR "No Dominoes" report, acknowledging that "liberal democracy would be difficult to achieve" in the region and focusing instead on the necessary building blocks of democracy

Patrick Clawson is deputy director of The Washington Institute. ❖

Policy #726

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

[\(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iraq \(/policy-analysis/iraq\)](#)