



1 REFORM // PROTEST // CHANGE

ESSAYS ON U.S. POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



A New Start for the U.S. on Mideast Democracy and Human Rights

David Pollock and Robert Satloff
September 2021

Current events in Afghanistan and the domestic U.S. political debate swirling around them have the potential to obscure the continuing role of human rights and democracy as core American values. Those values still are, and ought to be, integral to the policies of the Biden administration, both domestic and foreign. The top priority today, given events of the past few years, is properly a defensive one: protecting American freedom and democracy against interference by outside actors. Preserving and advancing human rights or democracy abroad are goals related to that foundational objective.

In that context, the emphasis is rightly on historic American allies where those existing values and institutions are most threatened by autocratic leaders or movements, whether inside or outside their borders. Another priority should be to focus on those instances of the most egregious abuses or extreme humanitarian emergencies. The Middle East, unfortunately, offers all too many cases in this latter category.

The Biden administration has already clearly signaled its understanding of some basic guidelines in this regard. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in his inaugural speech, expressed this sense of priorities and went further.¹ He argued that the flaws of democracy and society at home are no obstacle to U.S. support for democracy and human rights abroad. On the contrary, he said, they are all the more reason for the United States to work with others to shore up common foundations of freedom.

Moreover, Blinken asserted that the United States would no longer intervene to install democracy by force. A key passage from this address is worth quoting here:

We will use the power of our example. We will encourage others to make key reforms, overturn bad laws, fight corruption, and stop unjust practices. We will incentivize democratic behavior.

But we will not promote democracy through costly military interventions or by attempting to overthrow authoritarian regimes by force. We have tried these tactics in the past. However well intentioned, they haven't worked. They've given democracy promotion a bad name, and they've lost the confidence of the American people. We will do things differently.

How differently is the question this essay aims to answer, if only for the Middle East. Whatever one thinks of the final U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan, it underscores the point that the Biden administration will not indefinitely prop up fledgling democracies with American troops. Nevertheless, in other cases, some U.S. security support may be useful to protect and encourage progress toward democracy and human rights—or at least to prevent a takeover by the most oppressive elements in a particular society. Correspondingly, in the long run, more democratic, tolerant, and inclusive governments are likely to be better at defending themselves, and more reliable and effective security partners for the United States.

// Where the Middle East Fits In

The first part of the answer is simply that the Middle East, the central focus of U.S. foreign policy for the past twenty years, may be in the process of ceding, or at least sharing, that privileged position. And the reality, from the standpoint of interests and values alike, is that democracy or human rights, narrowly defined, are not the only valid American objectives in this especially volatile and violence-prone region. Rather, other crucial goals actually provide the essential foundation for basic human rights and eventual democratic evolution: preventing or mitigating violent regional conflicts, mass displacement or other humanitarian emergencies, and civil strife; and countering terrorism and violent extremism.

Beyond these immediate needs, the human rights and democracy agenda presupposes promoting long-term goals: the security of all regional peoples, and the pursuit and expansion of regional peace accords, along with social development, political stability, religious tolerance, nonproliferation, and sustainable environmental outcomes. These will all be an indispensable foundation for future progress on human rights and democracy. It is therefore essential to pursue that progress in ways that complement, rather than contradict, the supportive values of security, stability, and conflict resolution. This coordinated approach should apply, for example, to Arab countries that make peace with Israel: Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan, and others that may join the list. It should apply as well to partners that play positive roles in resolving other regional conflicts, as in Yemen, Libya, or Syria. The

guidelines that follow offer ways to coordinate these objectives, and to maintain a consistency of long-term principles while tailoring medium-term means and ends to each particular country.

Great Power competition is another intersection of this broader agenda with Middle East regional realities. Governments drawn to authoritarianism rather than models based on democracy or individual liberties may more readily align with China or Russia, and vice versa. Conversely, Chinese or Russian economic and strategic inroads in the region will be more likely to support authoritarianism than democracy or human rights.

But this is not a return to the Cold War. Indeed, it may well be that the lack of clear ideological “strings attached” from China and Russia is precisely what appeals to some Middle East autocrats. At the same time, however, the United States has an opportunity to support its own values—if it chooses to maintain a robust presence in the region.

More surprisingly, public opinion polls demonstrate that elections and other democratic political practices are not high on the list of popular priorities in most Middle East societies and show publics across the region generally ranking personal well-being, economic development, and stability or physical security easily above any purely political aspirations. The first human right, many would say, is the right to live in peace and dignity; the first freedoms, as American leaders proclaimed in the New Deal, are freedom from want and freedom from fear.

And while the term *democracy* remains relatively popular, it is most often defined by Middle East publics in terms of social services, a guaranteed standard of living, and reduced corruption, rather than in electoral terms. In fact, only minorities in most regional countries surveyed believe that free elections are essential to democracy. Moreover, from the perspective of today's coronavirus problem, it makes eminent sense that more accessible, affordable healthcare would be very high on the list of desirable reforms to advance a basic human right. Indeed, surveys demonstrate that in many Middle East societies—with the notable exceptions of Israel and the UAE—the majority of citizens are dissatisfied with their government's handling of this crisis, and want more action to ameliorate it.

Viewed in this light, one could make a reasonable case that U.S. support for a more equitable, non-corrupt distribution of government services would do more to advance human rights and “government by consent of the governed” in the region than any other policy. This broader definition of democracy may be more attuned to regional realities, perceptions, and aspirations than an emphasis on laws, procedures, and institutions common in countries that take stability and subsistence almost for granted. In short, a more comprehensive yet nuanced approach attempts to offer an agenda that is both ethical and pragmatic.

Furthermore, there is often unavoidable tension, at least in the policy-relevant short term, between some of these legitimate pragmatic objectives—both of U.S. policy and of Middle East publics—and the ideals of democracy, narrowly defined. A recent case in point: the debate over whether the United States should recognize a proposed Palestinian election in

which the Islamic Resistance Movement— Hamas—were allowed to run candidates, and how to respond if it did and won a share of power. One should always welcome participation of legitimate parties in a democratic election, but Hamas—which came to power through violent, extralegal force and has retained it ever since by maintaining a monopoly on such force—fell far short of that standard. Indeed, the prospect of a terrorist, extremist, irredentist, and intolerant organization using the mechanics of democracy only to maintain its stranglehold on internal civil liberties and threaten regional peace raises profound questions on both the practical and moral levels.

Conversely, the United States must maintain its strategic ties to a range of authoritarian regional governments, such as that in Ankara, despite its dismal human rights and democracy record of late. Two of the many reasons for that are to pull Turkey away from Russia and push it toward an entente with the Syrian Kurds. The striking thing about both objectives is that their rationales are rooted in both U.S. interests and American values at the same time.

The central logical conclusion is that no single formula for promoting democracy and human rights fits all cases in the region. Rather, each country presents a unique mix of challenges and opportunities, tradeoffs among potentially competing objectives, and short- versus long-term prospects for positive change. As a result, the proper policy tools and guidelines must be carefully tailored to particular circumstances. Indeed, the first general principle should be that individual cases are best approached as such—with the criteria for action being what is most likely to work in that instance, not what might apply in other cases.

// Some Broad Middle East Policy Guidelines

With these general principles and regional priorities in mind, the following represent some suggestions for an approach to this complex challenge. The desired criterion is a policy that is both virtuous and realistic. These recommendations are presented first as relatively abstract guiding precepts followed by sketches of their application to various concrete cases. Two major special cases at opposite ends of the political spectrum, Iran and Israel, will be examined separately in conclusion.

One quick caveat: the suggested guidelines that follow are meant to apply to the current, comparatively calm political situation in many countries of the region. A separate paper in this series will deal with a different dimension of the democracy debate: how to cope with cases of mass protest and potential major political upheaval, currently the exception rather than the rule. In addition, the few cases of full-fledged civil war, as in Syria, Libya, or Yemen, are beyond the scope of this essay and deserve detailed treatment on their own.

Start with basic individual freedoms, then consider larger political reforms. Human rights and democracy go together, but they are not the same. Civil liberties, including freedom of expression, religion, and association, are the building blocks of liberal democracy—as opposed to the possible “tyranny of the majority.” In the contemporary Middle East, there is much work to do on these fundamental personal rights, without risking either revolution or repression that might follow major political upheaval.

Therefore, while the United States should keep

in mind and encourage the ultimate goals of free and fair elections, separation of powers, and other features of full-fledged representative democracy, it makes both practical and moral sense to distinguish these ends from the earlier steps toward a long-term desired outcome. Among the six Arab Gulf monarchies, to cite one striking example, Kuwait comes closest to holding real elections for a real parliament, albeit one with limited powers. But most citizens of neighboring countries would much prefer to focus on individual freedoms and good governance, rather than emulate what they see as ineffective, divisive, or even culturally inappropriate Kuwaiti institutions.

Jordan and Morocco are two other Arab monarchies with parliaments and elections. Here, too, U.S. support for reforms might best be directed toward issues of equitable government services, combating corruption, freedom of expression, and bureaucratic accountability. That general arena promises progress that is faster and more relevant to the lives of the citizenry than further rounds of electoral or structural amendments.

Put things in perspective. It is obvious, though often overlooked, that today’s Middle East states start from vastly different places on the spectrum of democracy and human rights. Independent, credible NGO assessments, such as those published by Freedom House, Transparency International, and others, very usefully rank countries on these metrics, and show significant forward or backward trends over time. The United States should take this into account when contemplating either criticism or praise, punishment or reward, for performance in this realm. Otherwise, Washington would be

in the absurd position of responding to real but imperfect democracies in the same manner as to brutal or even genocidal dictatorships.

Pay at least as much attention to progress as to problems. A corollary to the above is that the United States should take extra care to recognize and reward relative improvements in this domain, even small ones. More to the point, Washington should do this as much as, if not more than, it deplores or penalizes transgressions.

This advice may go against a natural human tendency to concentrate on negative stimuli; and it certainly flies in the face of traditional diplomatic practice. But that tendency and precedent should be reversed, because they are not just unfair but also counterproductive. Two real-world cases, at opposite ends of the Arab democracy spectrum, vividly make the point.

Until very recently, the one real success story of the Arab Spring was Tunisia, where it began in December 2010. The country should therefore be very visibly moved, at the earliest possible opportunity, to the top of America's list for democracy promotion in the Middle East. The current uncertainty about President Kais Saied's emergency powers is precisely the occasion for a clear, but mostly private, message from Washington that a return to the fully democratic path would earn some tangible recompense. At the moment, his rival Rached Ghannouchi seems open to compromise, probably due to popular pressure. There is much more the United States could do, in both moral and material terms, to support Tunisia's unique and fragile achievement. Doing so would help demonstrate to the region, and to the world, that American policy on this sensitive subject is as much about rewarding good outcomes as it is about criticizing bad ones.

Saudi Arabia, in sharp contrast, is no democracy,

and American anger at the 2018 Jamal Khashoggi murder is abiding and deep. More recently, Riyadh has conditionally released a few high-profile political prisoners—like women's rights activist Loujain al-Hathloul and pro-normalization journalist Abdul Hameed al-Ghabin—but it continues to arrest hundreds of new "suspects" on dubious corruption charges. That may be an attempt to "game the system" by seeming to comply with the Biden administration's own emphasis on combating corruption as a key component of its democracy and human rights agenda.

At the same time, and quite apart from any strategic or economic considerations, the current Saudi government is moving systematically toward practicing and preaching a much more moderate brand of Islam than its traditional severe Wahhabi version—both at home and abroad. Most Saudi citizens are now freer to dress, work, worship, travel, and enjoy leisure as they choose—and opinion polls demonstrate how much they value these freedoms and increasingly approve of a "more moderate, tolerant, and modern interpretation of Islam." This is a significant positive transformation, of potentially revolutionary magnitude, and it should be appropriately welcomed and encouraged, without prejudice to any other issues on the U.S.-Saudi agenda.

Similarly, in the non-Arab case of Turkey, incentives should be readied for incremental improvements, along with disincentives for further regression. As one Turkish activist, Asli Aydintasbas, aptly puts it: "Focusing on a few symbolic cases and trading economic incentives for improvement on human rights makes more sense than simply issuing self-righteous reports on abuses."²

Small practical steps count. Another corollary to the requirement for perspective is that some near-term goalposts, commensurate with each country's particular situation, will necessarily

be modest. This means that in many cases, the United States should *explicitly* strive for incremental improvements in the human rights climate of individual countries, not their rapid transformation into mature electoral democracies.

An important case in point here is Iraq. For all its problems, including a constitutional and electoral system that demonstrably produces gridlock or worse, the current government is pushing harder and more effectively to constrain political violence, respond positively to popular protests, and reconcile the fragmented ethno-sectarian components of Iraqi society. For example: Baghdad is gradually detaining or marginalizing some of the militia leaders who flout its authority and abuse their political opponents. The Kurdish official who oversaw a failed referendum on secession in October 2017 was not executed, exiled, or imprisoned; instead, he became Iraq's finance minister and then foreign minister, with Kurdish autonomy maintained. And more recently, when a young Iraqi protestor and journalist was kidnapped and tortured by the violent militiamen he criticized, Iraqi prime minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi publicly visited him in the hospital upon his release—and vowed to protect the rights of all Iraqi citizens to speak and write freely.

Moreover, this Iraqi government is openly determined to sustain a close partnership with the United States, notwithstanding continuing threats from Iran and its proxies. In this new situation, tangible signs of support for Iraqi democracy and human rights deserve a prominent place in the Biden administration's policies toward the region as a whole.

Tailor priorities to particular cases. Just as small steps matter, the choice of priorities should match local circumstances: in some cases, religious tolerance may be the most promising or urgent issue to press; in others, equality for women; and in still others, freedom of expression,

fair access to jobs and public services, freedom from corruption, or some other important value. This does not mean trading one right for another, or turning a blind eye to certain abuses for the sake of ameliorating others. It does, however, mean a more realistic program of addressing different issues on a timetable, and in a manner, most suitable for achieving measurable progress in each society.

And tailor the means, not just the ends.

Once the priorities in each particular country are selected, the means to promote them must be calibrated appropriately. Heavy negative tools like sanctions, aid cuts, or boycotts should generally be reserved for the most egregious or recalcitrant cases, and preferably very precisely targeted. The level and tone of any public declarations should fit the nature of the problem.

A prime example is the use of sanctions to combat corruption, which is rightly a major theme of the Biden administration's overall approach to this problem set. In order to be effective, such sanctions should be narrowly applied, in a way that clearly distinguishes them from any efforts at "regime change"—and, equally important, readily reversible in case of better behavior by the targets. And they should ideally be multilateral, rather than unilateral U.S. measures, again in tune with the Biden administration's wider foreign policy posture. In this case, fortunately, the consultative and operational multilateral mechanisms for this already exist; and they should be utilized to the fullest. One country where the imposition of U.S. anti-corruption sanctions may be particularly useful and enjoy widespread popular support is Lebanon, where virtually the entire political class bears responsibility, via acts of commission and omission, for corruption and malfeasance that have driven the country to ruin.

Equally important, though too often overlooked, positive incentives for improvement should be

considered early and often. True, in the current economic and political environment, large increases in U.S. economic aid are probably not in the cards, even for highly desirable advances in democracy or human rights abroad. But existing programs—in education, training, cultural and professional exchanges, and even infrastructure—can be better targeted toward those goals. Overall civilian funding could perhaps be shifted among countries, depending partly upon their cooperation in this field. And non-expenditure items, such as presidential meetings and other honors, can usefully be doled out with the human rights and democracy factors taken very seriously into account.

Patience is a virtue. One significant Arab country too often overlooked in this discussion, perhaps because it straddles the region's geographic/bureaucratic borders, is Sudan. For the past two years, ever since the popular military overthrow of its longtime dictator, it has been moving step-by-step toward greater democracy and human rights. In August 2021, the Sudanese government even gave preliminary approval to render deposed dictator Omar al-Bashir to the International Criminal Court for trial over alleged war crimes in Darfur and elsewhere. But Sudan's new government remains in a self-declared transition phase, with a combined civil-military leadership including another alleged war criminal, and still has a long way to go toward elections and other milestones.

For precisely this reason, Sudan should be a fine example of rewarding progress, and not letting the perfect be the enemy of the good. The United States has already done the right thing by removing Sudan from the State Sponsors of Terrorism list, and supporting a deal to compensate its victims. Now is the time for sustained follow-up: high-level public encouragement; aid, trade, and investment to the greatest possible extent; and private advice about navigating the troubled waters of transition. All this would be a sound investment

in Arab democracy, one with a far greater promise of good returns than lecturing other Arab leaders about their assorted transgressions or shortcomings.

Private persuasion often beats public posturing. The record suggests that while quiet diplomacy may not score debating points at home, it is often the more effective means of getting results from Middle East leaders on their own delicate domestic issues. In fact, public criticism, even freezing hundreds of millions of dollars in aid, is more likely to generate a defiant response.

For example, in the important case of Egypt, the young Egyptian-American scholar Haisam Hassanein wisely suggests that

Washington should start with private dialogue and positive incentives, not public criticism or punishment... American foreign policy makers should not tie their hands with punitive measures this early, as they will run out of options with Cairo very quickly. Tying annual military aid, rushing for sanctions, and forceful public statements should only be used as a last resort after engaging in a human rights dialogue and evaluating the results with Egypt first...Indeed, an American acknowledgment that Egypt is facing a terrorism problem will serve the U.S. in its talks with the Egyptians.³

This is not to rule out any public statements, but simply to say they should not be the reflexive first resort. And they should not be a substitute for serious private deliberations. In that setting, these issues should be at or near the top of the agenda, not just an afterthought. The picture here is admittedly mixed. For example, Cairo continues to demand the detention of dual citizen Mohamed Soltan, whom it deported safely to the United States a few years ago. And in earlier years, the

Sisi government refused to back down on most human rights issues, except very belatedly in some cases where American citizens employed by NGOs were implicated—even after threatened reductions in U.S. aid. But in the past few months, Sisi’s government has quietly released journalist Khaled Dawoud and dozens of other civil society activists, with no public pressure or aid cuts from Washington. Thus, the record strongly suggests that cutting or conditioning military aid would not yield positive results, even if that sort of “virtue signaling” seems to satisfy some congressional or media critics.

Seek tangible results. The true test of U.S. policy in this area should be not headlines, but headcounts: of political prisoners freed; religious, ethnic, or sexual minorities equally treated; unjustly persecuted dissidents repatriated, allowed to travel, or reinstated in their jobs; and so on. To be sure, autocratic regimes are too often adept at gaming this aspect of repression, even preemptively detaining dissidents just in order to boast of their later release. But a resolute focus from Washington can mitigate this problem, so long as the messages delivered are honest, consistent, and clear.

An important case in point is the Palestinian Authority (PA). The Biden administration is rightly moving toward robust reengagement with it, especially in the economic and diplomatic spheres. But what seems missing so far is a serious effort to prod the PA toward better governance, less corruption, and greater respect for individual freedoms and tolerance for dissent. That would be both intrinsically worthwhile and valuable for other crucial goals: enhanced legitimacy and stability, even in the shadow of looming succession scenarios; political competition with Hamas or other violent radicals; and ultimate prospects for a two-state solution and peace with Israel.

The latest Palestinian opinion polls show that these internal issues are currently at the heart of

the PA’s steep decline in public approval; the U.S. administration’s very valid objective of strengthening it cannot be achieved without demonstrable progress in this area. This should not mean a rush to elections, or any other overly risky policy departures. It should, however, guide the United States toward incentivizing practical PA steps in the right direction, which would be both immediately popular and politically beneficial, in the longer term, to all interested parties.

Partner with allies, now more than ever.

Beyond the platitudes, this would represent a real and welcome departure from recent practice, and one worth a serious investment of high-level attention. Working with the European Union, the Anglo “Five Eyes” (United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand), and other allies on Middle East democracy and human rights projects would have a significant multiplier effect, both in the region and on multilateralism more generally. This partnering would pool resources, reinforce the message, and reduce the risks of diversion or backlash from regional regimes.

More than that, this tactical goal may well be worth tradeoffs on other issues, so long as core U.S. interests are not compromised. For example, one might discuss adjustments to some American trade policies, in exchange for a more coordinated U.S.-EU policy on human rights in countries where the EU arguably has more influence, such as Turkey or Iran. In other cases, it may be worth settling on a lowest-common-denominator stance on some questions of regional democracy for the sake of greater unity among our allied interlocutors.

Modernize the technological agenda. In its wider foreign policy pronouncements, the Biden administration has already articulated the imperative of staying ahead of the global curve on cutting-edge information and related technologies. It has put this primarily in the context of economic competition with China,

but also in connection with potential high-tech threats to democracy from hackers, social media manipulators, intrusive artificial intelligence applications, and the like.

The Biden administration's reference is probably first and foremost to Russia; but among Middle East countries, Iran also figures heavily in this mix, with dishonorable mention going to several Arab Gulf states. Qatar's media and social media activities cross the line from legitimate lobbying and public relations to the realm of disinformation, anti-American incitement, and even attempted interference in U.S. domestic politics. And both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been implicated in various recent attempts at illegal or unethical hacking, disinformation, and influence peddling inside the United States.

One way to defend against such threats to democracy is to mobilize a common front with the closest U.S. allies among technologically advanced democracies. In the Middle East landscape, Israel stands out as a good candidate for this mission.

At the same time, the United States should take care that these emerging information technologies, as wielded even from friendly countries, not be abused for anti-democratic ends, such as unregulated surveillance, harassment, or political repression. This, too, has possible Middle East regional ramifications, especially in light of the growing ties between Israeli companies and some Arab governments, in the Gulf and elsewhere. The high-profile case of the Israeli company NSO, and its Pegasus phone hacking technology, offers one chilling illustration of the problem. Here again, the preferred solution lies in active consultations with like-minded democracies—including Israel—leading to joint action about how best to manage this double-edged, potentially nondemocratic application of their advanced information and related technologies.

Include NGOs and activists, not just officials.

As an integral part of its pro-democracy and human rights agenda, the Biden administration would benefit from outreach to appropriate NGOs and experts when both formulating and implementing policy. Further, the United States should seek partners for this effort among foreign NGOs and civil society leaders, including some in the Middle East. The Biden administration's proposed "Summit for Democracy," reportedly planned for December 9–10, would be a logical venue to carry such an initiative forward.

In certain regional cases, this network should be expansive enough to cover quasi-government institutions such as "national human rights organizations," sometimes half-jokingly labeled GONGOs (government-organized NGOs). Even if these are subject to varying degrees of official control, they can sometimes help popularize and legitimize human rights discourse, to the point of pushing their government overseers toward enacting reforms. And their inclusion would provide relatively open points of access on this topic to otherwise highly resistant political systems.

An important example is Turkey, because its current government is backsliding on democracy and human rights, while much of its civil society remains firmly committed to both principles. In mid-March, the United States warned against proposals to outlaw completely the pro-Kurdish HDP opposition party, many of whose elected parliamentarians, mayors, and other officials have already been arbitrarily axed by Erdogan's administration. The next step should be to demonstrate that these are more than mere words. The Turkish activist Asli Aydintasbas again merits quoting on this theme:

Statements alone are just virtue signaling and can easily be ignored. Instead, Washington also needs to instruct its diplomats to uphold

the long-standing U.S. tradition of engagement with a cross-section of the country, including minorities, opposition parties, local governments and civil society—something U.S. officials failed to do over the past few years. Inviting Turkey’s elected mayors and civil society or human rights activists to a planned global democracy summit later in the year would also send the right signal.

In the Egyptian case, by contrast, greater selectivity about U.S. meetings with opposition figures is warranted—because in Egypt, unlike Turkey, much of the opposition is actually anti-democratic, anti-American, and anti-peace. Once more, some good counsel from a native analyst, Haisam Hassanein, warrants quotation:

The administration should refrain from inviting Islamists and opposition members who oppose U.S. interests and reject the peace treaty with Israel to meet any major figures from the administration...Surely, any public meetings with these people will be used by the opposition in its propaganda war against the Sisi regime, which is something the U.S. has no business to do.

American interests and values alike mandate support for a government committed to peace with its neighbors, even as the United States seeks to improve that government’s orientation toward its own people.

This is a promising aspect of specifying a “Summit for Democracy,” rather than a “summit of democracies.” In other words, the assembled

should be not just government delegations, but unofficial representatives as well. As a result, citizen-activists even from nondemocratic states could be invited to participate, along with others, giving further impetus to their courageous endeavors. In the Middle East context, this would add much relevance to such a gathering, and the Biden administration would be well advised to consider that favorably.

Don’t be harder on U.S. allies than on

adversaries. A common complaint against U.S. campaigns for democracy and human rights abroad is that they appear selective and even hypocritical, targeting friendly governments while tolerating worse abuses by unfriendly ones. In part, this reflects the reality that American aid, which may be brandished as leverage in these encounters, is naturally directed toward U.S. allies and not adversaries. But it is essential, for the sake of American credibility and effectiveness, to demonstrate in words and deeds that the United States can fairly balance its posture toward both sets of foreign powers. In practice, this means that Washington must be exceedingly wary of using the cudgel of foreign aid cuts as an instrument of pressure, even on behalf of laudable democracy or human rights objectives.

Listen to the locals. Pay close attention to recommendations from genuine human rights and democracy advocates from the region itself. To be sure, they offer diverse and at times even contradictory advice; and their best suggestions may be more appropriate for their own country than for others. Nevertheless, they exhibit some valuable common denominators, while also providing some very sensible country-specific propositions.

// Two Special Cases: Iran and Israel

Iran and Israel occupy opposite ends of the U.S. spectrum of regional adversaries and allies, but both warrant consideration in the human rights and democracy context.

Iran

Unlike most other Middle East cases, Iran's government is a U.S. adversary, so Washington has little to lose by pressing it to be less repressive and abusive toward its citizens. But promoting human rights in Iran is not the same as advocating "regime change." The former, a much more legitimate and limited objective, should be made integral to U.S. diplomacy toward Iran in both principle and practice. The renewed popular protests against corruption and repression in several major Iranian cities, along with the stage-managed election as president of ultra-hardliner and recidivist human rights abuser Ebrahim Raisi, only confirms the urgency of such a position.

This core issue should never be held hostage to nuclear or any other negotiations with Tehran. There is no good reason why such multipronged efforts cannot proceed in tandem. Historically, they once did so very successfully, despite many obstacles and delays, in the Soviet bloc and countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa—with or without regime change.

The general principles and practical tools for this effort should apply to Iran as well. These include: public statements and reports about violations of universal human rights; private discussions about specific cases, with top priority accorded to U.S. persons; coordination, to the extent possible, with democratic allies; targeted sanctions, judiciously selected but vigorously enforced; contacts with appropriate human rights NGOs and activists; technical support for free media and social media; and sustained multimedia outreach in local languages.

In the case of Iran, such a patient and peaceful push for human rights is admittedly a long-term and quite possibly a long-shot effort. Yet it is vital not only for its own sake, but also to rebut the legitimate complaint that the United States is sometimes tougher on human rights with its friends than with its adversaries. The old charge about "dictatorships and double standards" has lost none of its relevance in today's foreign policy context.

Israel

The most senior Biden administration officials have recently, and correctly, reiterated their recognition that Israel is a democracy. They have also, again correctly, refrained from repeating the canard that it is “the only Middle East democracy”—because, in fact, it is not the only one. It is less clear, however, how they intend to address any issues of democracy and human rights in the Israeli case, if at all.

The recommendation here is simple: the same basic principles should apply as for other cases. High-level American officials should publicly praise Israel’s democratic character. This includes its generally admirable current record regarding inclusion of its 20 percent minority of Arab citizens—in politics, education, economics, public health, and almost all other sectors.

At the same time, the United States should not shy away from criticism of any problems in Israeli democratic or human rights practices. But recent trends are moving in a more positive direction. A few months ago, the potential participation of an extreme right-wing, borderline-racist politician in Israel’s government seemed cause for concern. And in May, the tragically new internal civil strife between fringe Jewish and Arab elements—almost certainly prompted in large part by raised expectations based on recent progress toward socioeconomic and political integration—fell into the same category.

Since then, however, the new Israeli government has excluded religious and nationalist extremists. It has included, for the first time ever, an independent Israeli Arab political party,

dramatically giving the lie to the blood libel of Israeli “apartheid.” And it has evinced a genuine openness to dialogue with the United States about all issues on the democracy and human rights agenda, whether in the technological, religious, or ethnic domains, or others.

That dialogue, to be sure, may well reveal differences and difficulties, and have occasion for tough words. As in most other cases, those words should be delivered in private, precisely in order to have the most effect and least risk of a backlash. And, as in most other cases, they should not be punitively tied to aid, or to any other mutually beneficial forms of diplomatic, military, and economic/technological cooperation.

Most important, and particular to the Israeli case, any such issues should be kept clearly separate from those concerning Israel’s conflict with the Palestinians, which falls into a very different diplomatic, legal, and moral category. This problem needs to be resolved, or at least addressed in incremental fashion, on its own terms. Any attempt to lump it together with internal Israeli governance or human rights issues simply plays into the hands of those fringe elements—among Israelis, Palestinians, or Americans—who follow the false messiah of a “one-state solution.” That path leads not to democracy but to deadlock and perhaps even civil war, which would gravely threaten American interests and values alike. It must therefore be strictly avoided, precisely to help protect those doubly significant stakes for U.S. engagement in this region. ❖

NOTES

1. Antony J. Blinken, “A Foreign Policy for the American People,” U.S. Department of State, March 3, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/a-foreign-policy-for-the-american-people/>.
2. Asli Aydintasbas, “Can the Biden Administration Help Save Turkey’s Democracy?” *Washington Post*, March 15, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/03/15/turkey-erdogan-biden-administration-democracy-human-rights/>.
3. Haisam Hassanein, “How Can Washington Constructively Engage Cairo on Human Rights?” *Fikra Forum*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 19, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-can-washington-constructively-engage-cairo-human-rights>.

The Authors



DAVID POLLOCK is the Bernstein Fellow and director of Project Fikra at The Washington Institute. Previously, he served as senior advisor for the Broader Middle East at the U.S. State Department, with a focus on women's rights (2002–7), and as regional expert on the secretary of state's Policy Planning Staff (1996–2001). His recent Institute studies include *Asset Test 2021: How the United States Can Keep Benefiting from Its Alliance with Israel* (with Michael Eisenstadt) and *A Nation Divided: Palestinian Views on War and Peace with Israel*.



ROBERT SATLOFF is the executive director of The Washington Institute, where he holds the Howard P. Berkowitz Chair in U.S. Middle East Policy. An expert on Arab and Islamic politics, he has published widely on the Arab-Israel peace process, the challenge of political Islam, and the need to revamp U.S. public diplomacy in the Middle East. He is the recent coauthor of two Washington Institute Transition 2021 studies, focusing on U.S. relations with northwest Africa (with Sarah Feuer) and with Saudi Arabia (with Dennis Ross).



THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE
FOR NEAR EAST POLICY
1111 19TH STREET NW
WASHINGTON, DC 20036
WWW.WASHINGTONINSTITUTE.ORG
©2021 The Washington Institute
for Near East Policy. All rights reserved.