



A WASHINGTON INSTITUTE STRATEGIC REPORT



Views of Arab Democrats

Advice to America on Promoting
Middle East Reform



J. Scott Carpenter

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Front cover: A man and woman look out at a view of Wadi Dhahr in Yemen, 2002. (AP Photo/Joachim Ladefoged/VII)

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Acknowledgments

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J. SCOTT CARPENTER
Keston Family Fellow

Introduction

AS U.S. PRESIDENT-ELECT Barack Obama considers his multiple foreign-policy priorities in the Middle East, he will have to decide what emphasis to place on continuing to incorporate the core elements of the Bush administration's much maligned "Freedom Agenda." In his campaign speeches, Obama stressed the need for "steady action" in advancing for the region "a vision of democracy that goes beyond the ballot box." The United States, he said, should "increase support for strong legislatures, independent judiciaries, free press, vibrant civil society, honest police forces, religious freedom, and the rule of law" in the broader Middle East. Thus the foreign-policy question surrounding the Obama White House, at least with regard to the broader Middle East, is not so much whether the new administration will continue to encourage political reform in the region, but how it will do it *better* than the previous administration.

The importance of this question has created a veritable cottage industry of experts who make recommendations for the new president's foreign-policy team. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, as part of its ongoing Presidential Task Force on Countering Radical Extremism, will have recommendations to make as well. Yet, in a departure from the conventional think-tank approach of simply surveying the analysis and professional literature from D.C.-based experts on the region, The Washington Institute decided to reach out to the people for whom the policy question was ostensibly posed—Arab democrats. The goal was to elicit their views on the myriad social, political, and economic opportunities and concerns the Obama administration should factor into its deliberations on creating a more robust and effective democratization agenda for the broader Middle East. Hence, this report details a set of practical, forward-looking

suggestions from Arab democrats who have long endeavored to bring positive change to their respective societies.

This is a sharp change for The Washington Institute. Although the Institute typically gathers senior American foreign-policy experts from across the political spectrum in making its quadrennial recommendations on Middle East policy to the incoming administration, it has never before asked non-Americans to suggest what U.S. policy should be. In light of the highly contentious nature of the Washington-centered debate on this particular subject, however, giving Arab democrats a voice as part of the policy deliberation in the U.S. capital seems worthwhile.

Obviously, the United States will only pursue foreign policy that it deems to be in its national interest and not because non-Americans argue its merits. For this reason, a case is made by the author at the end of the report for the connection between democracy promotion and concrete national security objectives in the region. If the Obama administration concludes that pursuing political and economic reform in the Middle East is the right policy, however, these suggestions may prove useful in shaping new policy approaches in a way that advances both U.S. national interests and those of democrats in the region.

The core of this report is an analytical summary of an intensive dialogue in Amman, Jordan, and a number of follow-up discussions, involving activists and reformers—both men and women—from Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, and Tunisia. At the conclusion of the Amman meeting, each participant endorsed the spirit of the recommendations, even if he or she did not agree on every specific point. All participated in these wide-ranging conversations solely in their individual capacities and not as representatives of the institutions with which they are currently affiliated or of broader political movements.

Key Recommendations

SUPPORT Arab democrats by getting behind them, not in front of them. Too often the U.S. government has sought to lead rather than follow those who are working in their societies to produce meaningful, productive change. This leadership position must shift: if the United States continues to believe it can dictate the direction and pace of change in other countries, it will falter in its confrontations with radical extremists by undermining local mainstream voices who are the only ones who can truly compete with them.

STEP BACK and allow local actors to engage Islamists as appropriate. Engaging with Islamists has potential short-term and long-term disadvantages for the United States—especially if engagement takes place just for the sake of engagement. Instead, the United States should step back and allow local actors the political space to do the engaging. They can interact with Islamists with the kind of political acumen and sophistication that the United States will always lack. U.S. engagement with Islamists undermines these local political moderates by delegitimizing them and leaving them vulnerable to both their governments and the Islamists who continue to marginalize them.

CONSIDER linking foreign aid to progress against official corruption. Linking foreign aid to progress on human rights and democratization affords recipient governments in the region much room for scapegoating activists for starving the poor and the working class. Instead, the United States should consider conditioning assistance to performance on governance issues, particularly transparency, the rule of law, and anticorruption initiatives. Many governments have signed on to international agreements that would provide the benchmarks for such conditioning, such as the United Nations (UN) Convention against Corruption. In addition to being a more

effective agent for fostering meaningful reform and accountability abroad, the United States would also derive public diplomacy benefits: rather than allowing regional governments to stir up the masses with anticolonial rhetoric, the United States could be perceived as standing alongside the vast majority of the people in Arab countries who are profoundly disappointed with their own governments for failing to curb rampant corruption and to promote accountability.

FOCUS on policy reform, which is much more important than funding for programs. Partnering with governments and civil-society organizations to change the legal regime that fosters corruption, the repression of alternative political parties, and the state supervision of the media is the first crucial step in creating the necessary political space for a democratic society to emerge. Foreign-program assistance is important but should remain secondary to the active encouragement of overall policy reform and the implementation of new policies that foster the growth of civil society in the Middle East's recipient countries. Particular emphasis should be placed on independent media outlets and on the rule of law.

FIX the democracy assistance infrastructure. The current U.S. infrastructure for promoting democracy, including the National Endowment for Democracy, the Middle East Partnership Initiative, and the U.S. Agency for International Development, is alternatively too small or too bureaucratic to be effective. As suggested in more detail in the following passages, fundamental reform is needed. The next administration should also consider complementing these mechanisms with a British Council–like organization at arm's length from the U.S. government that could continue democracy promotion and cultural exchanges with particular governments independent of the vagaries of U.S. policy.

BROADEN private-sector participation in support of reform efforts. The bulk of funding for U.S. democratization efforts remains wholly government directed and implemented by either Washington alone or in partnership with the host governments. This funding structure may be crowding out private philanthropic foundations, individual donors, and commercial resources. Philanthropists, both inside and outside the region, private foundations, and the business sector should be encouraged to invest in the nongovernmental sector. To encourage such investment, the United States could lead an effort to create an official imprimatur/seal of approval for civil-society nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

DEVELOP a specific strategy to engage the youth in the region. The vast majority of the population in Arab countries is well under the age of thirty. A great number of these young people remain socially, politically, and economically excluded from their societies, creating a breeding ground for social unrest and potential political violence. Currently the U.S. government does not have a specific youth-oriented strategy to address the problem, believing instead that systemic policies producing a rising economic tide will raise all boats. The United States should be competing for these youths' attention and constructive social engagement by supporting programs in their respective countries that provide them with alternatives to either extrem-

“Foreign-program assistance is important but should remain secondary to the active encouragement of overall policy reform and the implementation of new policies that foster the growth of civil society.”

INCREASE cultural exchanges markedly, both in person and in broadcast media. Key to introducing a democratic culture in the Middle East is broader exposure of the Arab populace to democracy's mechanisms and benefits, not only in the United States but elsewhere as well. Such exchanges should be broader than intergovernmental and should include active participation of American citizens and U.S. officials on Arab satellite channels.

RECOGNIZE that people cannot live on democracy alone. The United States should stress economic reform as much as, if not more than, political reform. While rejecting the overly simplistic notion of “sequencing” economic and political reforms, the U.S. government should be vocal in urging governments to improve their economic performance and end corruption. It should also design programs and partnerships to help build and sustain a middle class, particularly by mobilizing financial resources for small- and medium-sized businesses.

ism or the illicit use or trafficking of drugs. Democracy programs are only a part of such a strategy.

RETAIN democracy promotion as a top priority in the Obama administration, but change the rhetoric. The Arab participants in The Washington Institute's Amman dialogue agreed that rhetoric is important, but that such rhetoric in the promotion and encouragement of democratization programs should provide a clearer and, at the same time, more robust definition of democracy that goes beyond elections. On the latter score, such a reformulated definition should include the notion of “human security,” making it clear that the idea of security should go beyond the security of the state to embrace the security concerns of individual citizens, who have a right to be secure *from* their governments. Melding issues of development and democracy, rather than discussing them as separate aspects of governance, will greatly aid this definitional and programmatic shift in emphasis.

CLEAR a path to stability and democracy before leaving Iraq. Nothing would undermine the prospect of political and economic reform in the region more than a U.S. disengagement from Iraq that leaves the country sliding backward toward extreme violence. The United States must find effective ways to both press and assist the Iraqi government toward providing security and public services to its *entire* people. As the Amman dialogue participants agreed, a “quick and simple” disengagement could very likely result in an implosion of Iraqi society and deal a sharp blow to the prospects of reform and transformation advocated by the Arab democrat participants.

ABOVE ALL, be honest and forthright about trade-offs. As rhetoric has outstripped action, the lack of consistency in both the direction and application of the Bush administration’s Middle East policy has severely undermined U.S. credibility among activists and the general populace of Arab countries. Determination, continuity, patience—and not holding democracy hostage to other issues and vice versa—all are elements vital to pursuing a long-term policy of advancing political and economic reform in the region. As the Amman dialogue’s participants concluded: be honest with the Arab public about the challenges and trade-offs Washington faces in its policy interventions in the region, but continue to push where and when possible.

Conversations with Arab Democrats

IN LATE 2008, Institute staff undertook a series of wide-ranging but structured conversations with Arab democrats around the Middle East. The discussions centered on a number of questions designed to elicit the views of those who are currently deeply engaged in the battle for the future of their respective countries. These activists are profoundly aware that they are struggling within the small space between typically omnipresent but sclerotic states and a rising wave of religious conservatism that is being converted politically to Islamism of various stripes. Nevertheless, these activists are not prepared to sit on the sidelines and concede defeat. Middle East governments are in need of new ideas and a fresh impetus to change, while the Islamists offer catchy but meaningless slogans (such as the Muslim Brotherhood's "Islam is the Solution" in Egypt) and the utopian promise of a society absolutely free of corruption, social antagonism, and discrimination. Islamism, these activists say, is only the latest in a long series of unexploded myths in the region, beginning with Gamal Abdel Nasser's pan-Arabism. Everything else has been tried, the Amman dialogue's participants reason, so why not democracy?

And yet, this political ideal would not be a democracy centered exclusively on elections, even though the regular transfer of power between contending parties and individuals is a cornerstone of a democratic system. To be sure, elections are the *sine qua non* for democracies around the world, but representative institutions and the rule of law are also cornerstones of genuine democracies—they are critical to safeguarding citizens' rights after elections take place. Given the well-known demographic and economic challenges facing the countries of the region, economic reforms are just as urgently needed, if not more so, as political reforms. The Arab democratic activists in the Amman dialogue reject the idea that economic and political reform must be sequenced: as practitioners, they know that unless there is accountability in a political system, transparency cannot be guaranteed. And without transparency,

there can be no popular support for the kind of economic reform that will create 100 million jobs in the next half decade. However difficult, economic and political openings will have to go hand in hand, the Amman dialogue participants argue.

To draw the participants out in more detail on these issues and others, a series of questions was put to them, ranging from the use of rhetoric in political leadership to the conundrum—from an American perspective—of whether and how to engage with Islamists. Each question was explored in detail, and there were many disagreements among the participants. In addition, they had their own questions to add to the richness of the discussion. For instance, is the United States really interested in producing democracy in the region? Would an Obama administration be interested in and capable of improving the image of the United States in the region? A set of conclusions emerged from these discussions that ultimately yielded the recommendations, summarized at the beginning of this report.

The context for the discussions was set by pointing out that the Bush Doctrine's Freedom Agenda, as elaborated in the president's second inaugural address, had generated a great deal of controversy among democratic activists in the Middle East, particularly after the election of Hamas and the widespread perception that the Bush administration had somehow abandoned the doctrine. Many of the Amman dialogue's participants expressed their profound concern that the Obama administration would abandon the policy altogether—the good with the bad—discarding a promising, transformational foreign-policy initiative in favor of something that returns U.S. policy to a stability-maintaining paradigm. If this were to be avoided, an articulate case from the region's Arab democratic activists and reformers would be important, especially as they have witnessed firsthand the Freedom Agenda's democratization successes (and near-successes) and can provide their expert observations on what the United States and its partners can do to build upon the foundations of the regional policy.

That any of the dialogue participants was willing to have this discussion in a serious way—in the midst of the war in Iraq and after Hamas’s election victory and the scandal of Abu Ghraib—serves to debunk the myth that any Arab’s engagement with the United States and Americans is tantamount to the kiss of death. All of those engaged on the issues under discussion acknowledged early on that the United States—like it or not—would have a role to play in fostering change in the region, and that they themselves had an interest in shaping what sort of change that would be. If the United States were to engage the Muslim Brotherhood, for instance, or give the Egyptian government a pass on canceling elections, it would surely have an

and also to ensure their protection, all the quotations herein are unattributed. Institute staff have tried to render faithfully in summary form the extensive comments from the dialogue’s participants, even where Institute staff members did not fully agree with the interpretations of those consulted for the report.

WHAT IS THE STATE OF ARAB LIBERALS IN THE REGION TODAY?

First off, the participants in the Amman dialogue, and many others with whom the Institute has consulted over the years on regional democratization initiatives, rejected the label of “liberals” or “moderates.” Focusing on ideological demarcations is fundamentally unhelp-

“Participants acknowledged that they face myriad practical challenges in their respective political arenas, trapped as they are between the hammer of the governments and the anvil of the Islamists.”

impact on their lives and work—and those of their colleagues and conationals. As one participant put it, better to “harness the elephant in the region than let it run wild.” Though presently diminished in terms of influence, Washington remains the principal force for change in the region, so it would be much better to work with the United States, especially where “their interests and ours are in sufficient alignment to allow for useful partnership and synergy.” The alternatives of even more repressive autocracy or militant Islamism are unacceptable to both the United States and to these activists. Although not prepared to put their case in terms of U.S. national security, these Arab activists nonetheless believe that the United States would be more secure if regional democrats succeed in their respective countries.

The following is the Institute staff’s summary analysis of the discussions—presented as answers to salient questions about U.S. regional policy—including representative statements and evocative anecdotes that underlie many of the policy and programmatic suggestions. To ensure candor among the participants,

ful, many said, “since you need to build a strong center of like-minded people who come from across the political spectrum” to build democracy and confront extremism. A better alternative, they concluded, is to test individuals on their democratic credentials: Do they support minority rights, a free and open media, political pluralism, women’s participation in society and politics, and regularly held elections? How do they describe themselves politically? Are they “movement types” or iconoclastic individuals who embrace dissent simply for the sake of dissent? One participant gave an example of the problem from his country: The Liberal Party has an excellent, well-developed platform, but the leader of the party is well known for his corruption and is part of the “loyal opposition.” The participant continued, “He and his party are not part of the future, despite the fact that their ideas resonate with the ‘Liberal International.’”

Definitions aside, the dialogue’s participants acknowledged that they face myriad practical challenges in their respective political arenas, trapped as they are between the hammer of the governments and

the anvil of the Islamists. The list of articulated challenges is long and presented mostly with reference to their primary political challengers, the Islamists. Unlike the Islamists, Arab democrats have no umbrella organization, either within their respective countries or regionwide; they have no common platform as yet, and no means of delivering it to a broad audience if they did. They have scant financial resources, not because such resources don't exist, but because they have not been marshaled in such a way that would bring coherence to their movement.

Further, Arab democrats have proved to be unsuccessful at finding means to deliver public/constituent services. The governments are the primary service deliverers, and Islamists have taken advantage of the large gaps in service delivery to meet people's needs. Islamists' delivery of services at the local level—from making funeral arrangements to starting microcredit programs—lends credibility to the idea that they can govern nationally. One participant relayed the story of a young Lebanese man who regularly attended Hizballah rallies and events because every month the group would give the man and his family a “gift”—a check ranging from \$500 to \$700—even though he never asked for it. Whenever Hizballah had an event, the young man would receive a phone call, asking him to bring his family. “I wouldn't dare say no,” the man said. Unless the governments find a way to decentralize and bring the state closer to the people, it is unlikely that this local-service-delivery advantage on the part of Islamist parties can be closed in the short term.

Islamist grassroots organizations have been complemented by a built-in medium for communicating with the public: the mosque. In contrast, secular democrats are prohibited by law in most Arab countries from organizing on university campuses or in government ministries or in broader society in some cases. Unless and until the law changes to allow greater political pluralism, Islamists will continue to be the best organized at the local level of government. Islamists are also increasingly taking advantage of advanced media, including the internet. Alternative voices provide a genuine competitive political environment, but “cyber debates” or protests in political chat rooms do not have

the power of organized grassroots movements. The internet is, however, one promising means of organizing Arab democrats and disseminating their ideas to larger audiences.

In general, democrats remain squeezed between governments and Islamists, but they are not giving up. Nor do they shy away from competition, no matter how difficult. “Our time is coming,” said one participant.

HOW SHOULD THE UNITED STATES APPROACH DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN THE REGION?

Although there were sharp criticisms of the rhetoric and practice of the Bush administration's Freedom Agenda, participants in the Institute's dialogue in Amman and thereafter sought to convey a clear, constructive message: democratic governance remains the highest priority for the people in the countries of the Middle East. Finding means to support that foreign-policy initiative should remain a top priority for the United States as well. That said, most of the dialogue's participants agreed that the Obama administration should attempt to define more clearly what it means by “democracy” in the foreign-policy context. Although all the participants understood the importance of context in Washington's rhetorical support for democracy, the lack of a clear definition for this goal has allowed for a lot of misunderstanding in the region. Early on in the Bush administration's second term, such ambiguity also created “an expectation gap,” in which regional activists thought the United States was prepared to do more than it was, and many foreign governments perceived the policy as a euphemism for “regime change.”

According to one participant, international legal conventions—the UN's Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, in particular—should be the proper standard against which governments are assessed in terms of democratic practices. In addition, a number of participants stressed that although rhetoric on democracy is important, U.S. policymakers should not fear emulating EU foreign-policy officials—who focus primarily on “good governance” issues in their deliberations on the Barcelona Process and the Euro-

Mediterranean Partnership—as long as they continue to talk about and press for further democratization, something EU foreign-policy officials tend to downplay. Good governance is critical to the functioning of the state and can be subject to measurement in a way that democratization often cannot be.

The Obama administration should include the “human security” concept in its definition of democracy. Too often, Middle Eastern states are able to postpone serious economic or political reforms by invoking national security requirements. Deeper reform conducted too quickly, these states’ officials argue, will increase their insecurity. “Insecurity for whom?” these activists ask. The focus should not be on the security of the state but, rather, on the security of the individual *from* the state. Although a core set of national security requirements must be present for any state to exist, the nature and degree of the security establishments in most states of the region clearly imperil individual human security. The state, by definition, has a monopoly on the use of violence, but it should not have a monopoly on security.

Given this concept of human security, the Obama administration should more clearly recognize in its rhetoric that simply promoting democracy will not sufficiently address the challenges these Arab societies face. With unemployment rates of 25 percent or higher, and creaking education and health-care systems, the Arab states face a future of unrest and instability; hence, the Obama administration should place equal emphasis on economic *and* political reform. The new administration should also take advantage of the public’s frustration with their governments’ seeming inability to participate in or derive any tangible benefits from globalization, in contrast to countries such as China, India, Singapore, and Brazil. Arab countries lag behind others in math and science, as one participant pointed out. The way to fix that cannot be to focus exclusively on democracy promotion and good governance, but to invest in educational institutions that will give Arab youth the skills they need to compete in a global economy. One participant went so far as to coin the term *devocracy*, the linkage of development with good-governance goals. “Democracy must

produce something for people. Otherwise support for it as an ideal is undermined,” this participant continued. The example given was again West Bank and Gaza, in which promises of political freedom under Fatah failed to produce economic opportunity because of broad-based corruption of the elected political elites, a factor the international community has contributed to by failing to insist on accountability.

A number of observers—participants and experts outside the region—pointed out that the United States should reflect seriously on the accountability factor. Why was it, they asked, that in countries that received the most U.S. aid, such as Egypt and Jordan, anti-American sentiment was typically higher? This may be because people presume that the close relationship between their ruling regime and the United States is in fact the principal reason the regime can undertake repressive and undemocratic policies with impunity. In such cases—Egypt is a prime example—anti-Americanism is a natural reaction to U.S. rhetoric *experienced* as both hypocritical and insincere.

In terms of creating more accountability, some participants argued that linking U.S. economic assistance to specific economic benchmarks could make sense, but that tying aid to specific political reforms does not. “The idea that a Western power would dictate or be seen to blackmail one of our countries into changing its political system does not go down well with our people,” one participant said. What’s worse, another added, was that when the United States did link assistance to democracy, the people who received the blame for such official criticism were the democracy and human rights activists who “were taking food out of the poor’s mouths”—in effect, governmental blame passing. If the United States is to tie aid to governance-related benchmarks, it should look to international conventions on corruption. Most countries in the region have signed on to these treaty-based instruments and thus will be less able to convince their people that they are being forced to enact laws against their will. Moreover, the United States will be able to stand clearly on the side of the people in the region who are disgusted with the extent of corruption among officials at all levels of government.

Not only did democracy have to produce economically, it also had to produce politically. One participant from the Gulf pointed out that in the 1990s in Bahrain, youths carried signs proclaiming, “We want the parliament!” Now they have lost faith in the parliament because they do not see what they were fighting for.” There is a danger, a Moroccan activist added, that when elections are held and no power is granted to the parliament—and no consequent political changes are made—people become apathetic and then take their political aspirations underground, becoming radicalized in the process. The fact that turnout was remarkably lower in the last parliamentary elections, he added, was a clear signal of this dis-

Eschew double standards—but not the ones you’re thinking about. The United States has to do a better job of practicing what it preaches, of course. Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, and support for water-boarding, participants agreed, are all obvious impediments to the democratic, human-rights message the United States seeks to convey. And although many U.S. political leaders—Republican and Democrat—have condemned such practices, the United States should be equally condemnatory of ally and enemy alike when it comes to pushing for democratic openness or improved human rights abroad. Why are wrongful incarcerations of secular Syrian dissidents harshly condemned, for instance, while crackdowns on Muslim Brotherhood members

“The United States should be equally condemnatory of ally and enemy alike when it comes to pushing for democratic openness or improved human rights abroad.”

affection. For this reason, the Obama administration should caution governments that cosmetic political reforms can *and will* backfire.

Is it critical for the Obama administration to help the Iraqis succeed? Although few participants supported the military overthrow of Saddam Hussein, all agreed that the United States should not leave Iraq before allowing its fledgling democratic institutions to take hold, if not flourish. The same was true of the international community’s support of Lebanese democracy. In both Iraq and Lebanon, the future of democracy was at stake and in danger of being overtaken by the rising influence of Iran. “You and we need a success story,” said one participant. “If the concept of federalism succeeds, it will set a very important power-sharing precedent in the region, one that countries such as Lebanon can emulate.” A genuine democracy in Iraq will also be a particularly important precedent for Arab regimes that argue the United States should “solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, then we can talk about democracy.”

in Egypt are glossed over? Why are local elections in Iran harshly criticized, while Egypt is allowed to cancel its elections altogether without a note of castigation? Egregious inconsistency in foreign policy fuels cynicism about U.S. motives.

WHAT EMPHASIS SHOULD THE UNITED STATES PLACE ON ELECTIONS?

The United States should emphasize electoral laws and their lawful administration over elections themselves. Elections are scheduled in most countries of the region, and where they are held, the United States should press governments to make the process fairer and freer. It is inconceivable that the United States, would fail to do so. The United States should, however, go beyond an exclusive focus on election day. The State Department should place greater emphasis on influencing the reform of electoral laws that have been used by the regimes and their Islamist opposition parties to jury-rig results. Without new electoral laws that envision greater pluralism, elections themselves will prove fairly meaningless. The Obama

administration, together with the rest of the international community, should also take a clear position on the participation of armed actors—public-security forces or paramilitary groups—in elections.

Of course, if the United States encourages free and fair elections, and such elections actually occur, the United States should accept the results and work with whoever is elected, even if it means compromise—obvious allusions to the election of Hamas in West Bank/Gaza and Hizballah in Lebanon. (For a fuller discussion of this issue, see the section “One American’s Viewpoint” later in this report.)

SHOULD DEMOCRACY PROMOTION BE SEPARATED FROM OTHER FOREIGN-POLICY ISSUES?

Participants were divided on whether the United States should separate democracy promotion from other issues on its foreign-policy agenda, particularly when it came to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In general, the farther away participants lived from the epicenter of the conflict, the less importance they placed on it in terms of democratic developments in their respective countries. Also, those whose countries had made peace with Israel—Egypt and Jordan—were less vocal. One Palestinian participant expressed his view that there would be little progress on reform as long as regimes in the region continued to accept the status quo in Palestine. “People here will not accept democratic regimes that accept the current situation in Palestine,” he explained, citing Lebanese prime minister Fouad Siniora and Palestinian Authority prime minister Salam Fayad as two examples of leaders whose relatively scant popular support stems from a widely perceived acquiescence on their part. The Fayad government especially is at its lowest popularity in years because it is seen as compromising on fundamental issues, the participant explained.

This was not the majority view, however. Most of those interviewed strongly disagreed with the idea that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or any other major foreign-policy issue, had to be resolved in order for U.S. democracy promotion efforts (or their own similar efforts, for that matter) to bear fruit. Their main

concern was just the opposite: that long-term democracy and development objectives would continue to be subordinated to short-term security needs of the United States. The United States should not allow the governments of the region to hide behind the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but neither should the United States allow the governments to hide behind their support of the global war on terror. The region is full of people who are cynical about the United States and its aims, and the best and only way to change those views is by patiently and consistently adhering to a policy. The inconsistency in the policy, as witnessed in the past two-plus years, has sharply undermined the credibility of the United States, most agreed. Some suggested it would be best to create an institution outside the U.S. government that is devoted exclusively to cultural exchanges and democracy programs, a point that participants returned to later in the discussion about mechanisms of U.S. support to Arab democrats. (See below.)

WHAT SHOULD THE U.S. POSITION BE ON ENGAGING ISLAMISTS?

Clear objectives should be set when choosing whether or not to engage with Islamists. The consistent point made here was that the United States should not engage Islamists just for the sake of engagement. Without a coherent strategy that outlines clear objectives, definable goals, and preferred outcomes, such engagement will be counterproductive. In this regard, participants encouraged the United States to assess what such engagement in Iraq or elsewhere has produced over the past eight years—with the clear expectation that such an assessment would reveal few achievements in terms of moderating views or platforms.

All participants noted that profound social changes are taking place within their countries. Arab societies are becoming much more conservative, more pious. One participant pointed out that more piety causes many to “identify with Islamist parties for their social platforms, but this does not prevent them from simultaneously favoring democracy, greater rights for women, and economic liberalization.” Even when people are observant in their workaday lives, many

disapprove of the use of religion by political parties to influence voters. A revealing example was drawn from the Palestinian territories: While 82 percent of Palestinian youth between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five thought that the Quran and Hadith should govern all aspects of life, 72 percent said that domestic and partisan politics should not be expressed in the mosque, and 81 percent stated that religion should not be used as a means of influencing whom they vote for. Furthermore, 92 percent said that if someone supports a secular or liberal party, it does not mean that person is not a good Muslim.

The political challenge for democrats is complicated by the changing public face of Islamism. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey has demonstrated that pro-Western, democratic Islamist parties can come to power and govern—and be acceptable to the West. “Whatever the experience of the Turks, the AKP has had an enormous influence on Islamist parties in the region,” said one participant. In terms of physical appearance alone, Muslim Brotherhood members in Egypt today are not foreboding figures with flowing beards and ankle-length *dishdashas*; instead, they sport neatly trimmed beards and Western-style suits. Amr Khaled, an extremely popular Egyptian Sunni televangelist, does not have a beard at all and is rarely seen without a suit and tie. All this makes it much easier for modern-day Islamists to relate to youth. It also conveys the message that all Islamists should not be lumped into one broad category but, rather, into several groups with figures who have varying ideas and practices. The problem, one participant explained, is that there is not one voice that speaks for all Islamists; they range from wanting to create an Islamic *umma* (nation) to advocating democracy.

One of the problems with the United States engaging Islamists is the paramount danger (from the Arab democrat perspective) that the United States would legitimize Islamists as the *only* viable alternative to the status quo. Such an official countenance would be dangerous on two fronts: First, it would encourage the Islamists to discount the democrats even further as potential partners or legitimate competitors. Second, it would cause the governments to crack down on any and all opposition forces even harder, as they would

perceive the United States as “giving a green light” to “soft” regime change.

Middle East governments need to compete with Islamists by bringing government goods and services closer to the people. In helping Middle Eastern governments extend their reach to more constituents, the United States should encourage policies that improve the delivery of public services to their citizens. “You are a government,” said one participant, referring to the United States. “You should engage with the governments. An advantage of allowing democrats the space to engage is that democrats can force their Islamist competitors to explain their positions to the local population in a way the United States cannot.” Islamism, one participant explained, is the “last unexploded myth in the Arab world.” Much like pan-Arabism and nationalism, political Islam serves many people in the Arab world as a way to improve their lives and restore their pride and dignity in the international community. Citizens of contemporary Arab states view these regimes as having failed their people, and Islamist parties are well organized and can present themselves as the better political, social, and economic alternative.

In the Palestinian territories, exit polls revealed that most Palestinians voted for Hamas because Fatah was corrupt and dysfunctional, not because it was religious or antisecular. Several participants thought that if only Islamists were allowed to govern, their flaws would soon be revealed, and they would not be able to deliver what they have been promising for years. One participant offered the example of the Justice and Development Party in Morocco, and another pointed out the difficulties Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood encountered when it finally agreed—under pressure from competing political parties—to release a platform, which it removed from its website three days later, after democrats and human rights activists vehemently criticized the platform’s exclusion of women and Copts from the position of president. Other participants did not think the risk of “allowing” Islamists to govern was worth taking, fearing the concept of “one man, one vote—one time” that has been associated with Islamist parties ever since Iran’s Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Decentralization has to be a huge part of the effort of reforming Arab governments' delivery of public services. Relying on NGOs is the best way for what one participant called "familiarization" to take place, but the U.S. government should not be in direct contact with the organizations. "Your problem is that you can't know them like we do. You'll end up screwing it up." The most poignant anecdote in this portion of the Amman dialogue came from an Egyptian participant: "I met with the head of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt recently to debate with him. After a very long

that come to rule their countries should not be given a pass, nor should the West abandon its principles. "China and India," one participant said, "support the post-World War II [international order] but want to have [their own place in it]—some of these Islamist groups want to create [an international order] of their own. There are two options when it comes to dealing with such groups: to convince them to become a part of the international system or to isolate them." Again, engagement for the sake of engagement should be avoided.

"The United States should understand the ambivalence that many in the region feel toward Washington—if not toward American society itself—and find ways of being more nuanced in its approach."

conversation, he concluded by saying, 'Sister, after all, you see we are very close.' I responded by asking him a final question: 'I am an Egyptian and a Muslim, but an Egyptian first. What are you?' 'My sister, I am only a Muslim!' 'Then, sir, you and I are not the same.'" This anecdote, she said, highlighted the primary problem with the goal and intent of Islamic democracy. And it was that "problem" that led most of the participants to conclude that the United States itself should not engage Islamists. "You want to engage Islamists and I want to compete with them," said one participant, while another added that "when you engage with them you cut me off at the knees." Instead, the United States should seek ways to empower Arab democrats in their competition/engagement with "our Islamists."

Still, if the Obama administration makes the policy decision to engage Islamists, the U.S. government should do so with the intent of challenging Islamist parties to observe international legal norms and conventions, while demanding the same from ruling regimes to insulate Washington from complaints of hypocrisy. The International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, in particular, would be a good way to evaluate how committed Islamic parties are to playing by the international community's rules. Islamist parties

In sum, the rise of Islamism in the Middle East is a trend that the United States—and Arab democrats—cannot discount. But the Obama administration should weigh very carefully the question of whether or not to engage. The first principle, most participants noted, should be "to do no harm." Unless there is a strategic rationale supported by clear objectives, avoid any action.

HOW WOULD YOU ASSESS CURRENT U.S. MECHANISMS USED FOR DEMOCRACY PROMOTION?

For many of the participants in The Washington Institute's Amman dialogue, the question of what Arab democrats want from the Obama administration was demeaning. Rather, the question should be, as one participant put it, "What do we want, period. Only after we arrive at that answer can we ask the next: how can you or anyone else help?" This was a point that nearly everyone agreed on. The United States routinely gets in the way of the people it is trying to help—and ends up hurting them in some way. The United States should understand the ambivalence that many in the region feel toward Washington—if not toward American society itself—and find ways of being more nuanced in its approach.

Particularly, the United States should find ways to “get behind activists, not ahead of them.” Unfortunately “the short-term, instant-gratification mentality of the American mind means you are learning the wrong lessons,” said one participant. “First you want democracy and then you don’t. First you want to help us but don’t know how, and so you give up.” The issue of consistency was repeatedly emphasized throughout the discussions.

Alongside these legitimate and important points, participants, when pressed to assess the current tools the United States has to support reformers in the region, had a number of sharp critiques. Foremost among the critiques that centered on the habit of micromanaging both strategy and resources. “You always seem to know better than we do what needs to be done,” said one participant. “My organization has a clear focus, but I’m always trying to fit my objectives into your predetermined strategies.” Despite such concerns, the consensus was that the machinery of U.S. democracy promotion did not need to be completely overhauled or abandoned but, rather, refined in a way that better serves the needs and conditions of individual countries. The problems in Egypt are not the same as those in Tunisia or Kuwait, and the activities of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) should reflect those nuances.

National Endowment for Democracy. NED’s arm’s-length distance from the U.S. government was seen as a strong point, and its small grants program was singled out for praise. But the NED’s relatively small size was seen as a drawback. Most participants believed the NED should be vastly expanded or, preferably, that a new NED be created specifically for the region. There are a number of new democracy foundations in the region, most agreed, but the United States should definitely have its own.

One major issue with the NED was the perception among participants that because the organization has been around for such a long time, people running and staffing it have specific ideas on what things should look like. They are trying to do what they did

in Eastern Europe, said one participant, but times have changed, and both the climate and culture are different. A number of participants complained that in recent years, the NED operated under the belief that people in the region should be engaging in discussions with Islamists; anything outside that was not “fashionable.” Another participant agreed that there was a “prevailing Islamic trend within the MENA [Middle East and North Africa] department of the NED.” The NED should be helping people in the region implement what they believe is necessary for the promotion of democracy and not dictating what should be implemented.

Participants engaged in this aspect of the discussion repeatedly raised the idea of creating a foundation similar to the NED but specifically for the Arab region. This new organization, the participants noted, would initially be funded by the U.S. Congress but would also aim to attract private-sector funding to support think tanks and research, as well as projects. The organization could also have a branch to do cultural exchanges. The most frequently cited model for this new organization was the UK’s British Council and, like the Council, the U.S. organization would have offices in every capital around the region.

Middle East Partnership Initiative. Despite its growing pains and insistence on branding—a problem shared with USAID—MEPI was deemed most accessible and most flexible of the three groups. People who worked at MEPI were described as “creative.” They listened and “were there to help.” One participant was thankful for being able to submit concept papers in Arabic and French, and that MEPI staff members were then prepared to help develop accepted concepts into full-fledged proposals. Still, too many MEPI funds were going to big U.S. organizations; more could be delivered through small grants. “You’ll accomplish more with less,” said one participant. Allowing for regional-programming ideas and giving each embassy the ability to make small grants were aspects of what most considered a positive model that the Obama administration should preserve. Many also praised MEPI for its broad approach; the focus wasn’t only on political change but on economic and education

reform as well. Strengthening watchdog-like organizations and other advocacy groups, as well as sponsoring business associations, is an important part of building democratic institutions on the nongovernmental side.

United States Agency for International Development. Of the three organizations, USAID garnered the most criticism because its primary function was perceived to be working with governments to establish and achieve longer-term development goals. Strengthening civil society was not perceived to be a USAID priority by most of the participants. “USAID is used to large infrastructure programs with the government,” one participant said. “Their contracting people don’t really understand NGOs.” Another added, “For them, a \$50 million project is the same amount of work as a \$5,000 grant, so why bother [with the latter]?” Moreover, USAID’s “one-size-fits-all requirements” make it virtually impossible to get small grants at the grassroots level.

Solutions such as NGO support centers sounded good to participants in theory, but USAID allowed such organizations to become tools of the governments, providing ministry representatives opportunities to sit on or even chair their boards. One participant described how one NGO support center designed by USAID shared prewritten, preapproved concept papers to individuals who turned in apparently unsatisfactory papers of their own. The participant surmised further that this practice stemmed from the fact that USAID had to spend money and needed to make sure “good ideas were being supported.” The consensus was that USAID, out of the three organizations examined in this report, needed the most comprehensive reform.

HOW WELL TARGETED IS U.S. FUNDING FOR DEMOCRACY-PROMOTION EFFORTS?

1. The problem of too much money. At times, the State Department and USAID throw too much funding at a grantee, compromising its ability to develop and sustain capacity—and, in the worst cases, corrupting the project’s implementers. If USAID suddenly grants a small Egyptian NGO millions of dollars when it is used to operating on a budget of \$3,000 a year, the

NGO will understandably not know what to do with the extra funding. Instead of the money going to constructive, sustainable projects, it may simply go toward printing an additional 50,000 copies of a brochure that no one will read.

The need to spend large amounts of “democracy funding” was seen as derivative of a U.S. policymaking rationale that tends to equate democracy promotion with the amount of resources dedicated to it and the number of projects funded. This is a fallacy, all participants agreed. Policy matters more than projects, and policy is where the U.S. government can have the greatest impact. One concrete suggestion was that if more money did need to be spent, it could be dedicated more usefully to management support. For instance, many NGOs cannot afford consulting services to strengthen their organizations. Finding some way to provide management expertise in this way would be welcome.

Along these lines, the need was expressed for an advocacy group or association that would support democracy in the Middle East. Funding could help to consolidate and institutionalize NGOs and individuals who support democracy around the region. Such an association could serve the purpose of educating government officials in the United States and decisionmakers elsewhere on the needs of the region, while creating capacity to lobby for and protect organizations in individual countries. Young activists, in particular, would benefit from such an association, especially if the organization also trained them in advocacy skills.

2. The problem of “projectizing.” Along with too much money, the problem of dividing all efforts among discrete projects is a serious impediment to the development of organizational capacity. Core support for NGOs in the region is critical to such development, but most donors—including the United States—“projectize everything.” There should be more-nuanced support for democracy-promotion organizations that acknowledges the fragility of civil society in the region. Expect accountability but provide more flexibility.

3. The problem of branding. One of the chief complaints of those who receive funding from U.S. governmental sources relates to branding, the requirement that a grantee brand all of the products produced with the USAID or MEPI logo. A typical statement from the participants goes as follows: “We are grateful for the resources and are prepared to acknowledge them, but requiring branding makes things even more difficult for [those of] us who are working in the political field.” Unlike those NGOs that are dedicated to improving education access or stimulating trade, MEPI or USAID branding of politically oriented NGOs is too convenient a tool in the hands of the government or the Islamist opposition that plays to anti-American sentiment. “We live with it, but it would be easier if these rules were relaxed,” said one participant.

can you have a strategy pursued over time if people are constantly rotating out after two or three years? Continuity and consistency are crucial elements of these organizations’ success.

5. The problem of ignoring policy research. For a country that obsesses about the so-called battle of ideas, the United States supports too few research institutions or think tanks, preferring to develop advocacy and service-provision organizations. With the exception of small amounts from the NED, almost no funding goes toward public-policy research. Policy briefs coming from the region are important and can do a great deal to inform both public opinion and policymakers. More resources should be made available for developing research institutions, most participants agreed.

“The need to spend large amounts of ‘democracy funding’ was seen as derivative of a U.S. policymaking rationale that tends to equate democracy promotion with the amount of resources dedicated to it and the number of projects funded.”

4. The problem of micromanagement. Several participants complained about micromanagement from Washington. Political development strategies are often preconceived and based on, for example, NED’s idea or MEPI’s idea of what the end result should look like. More than one participant stated that governmental implementers project a desire to replace local implementers. The idea arose of a think tank or consulting group that could assist the relevant funding organization in working with the grantee to come up with a strategy that fits both the organization’s requirements and the grantee’s objectives. The Foundation for the Future was mentioned as a G8-supported institution that could fill this role but, unfortunately, was not currently meeting its potential.

Another impediment to implementing a sound democracy-promotion strategy is the constant turnover at U.S. embassies. As one participant asked, how

WHAT ROLE SHOULD CULTURAL EXCHANGES PLAY IN U.S. EFFORTS TO PROMOTE DEMOCRACY?

There is no better way for the United States to promote democracy than to showcase its own democratic system and institutions. Accordingly, cultural exchanges should be increased dramatically. Moreover, the United States should find ways of using both its own foreign broadcast organizations (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Radio Farda) and the Arab media more creatively in this regard. “If you could bring three hundred million people to your country for two weeks, what would you show them? Why don’t you use Arab media for this in some way?” queried one participant. More young people should be the prime candidates for such exchanges, as well as the leaders of NGOs. Arab NGOs have much to learn from American NGOs in terms of organizational structure, staffing, and the like.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF BUSINESS IN PROMOTING DEMOCRACY IN THE REGION?

Many participants in the Amman dialogue expressed the view that today's business sector in the region is much more open to reform issues than in the past. This new openness is largely a reaction to the increasingly globalized economy, which demands greater transparency and improved rule of law to safeguard markets, property rights, and profits. For these reasons, participants expressed their belief that local business could make solid partners for civil-society activists working toward the same goals. Still, big business on the whole remains captive to the state, and expectations about the private sector's interface with politics should remain realistic, in that the private sector in the Arab states, like the private sector in most other countries, will behave conservatively. "Capital is coward," quipped one participant.

When asked if they felt foreign government funding was crowding out local private sector resources, few of the participants risked saying yes. But there was an obvious concern among most of the participants that the balance in funding needed to shift. Most of the participants said that, relatively speaking, too much governmental funding was coming from the European Union and the United States in support of local civil society development. Although they understood why this was the case, they also believed that such an imbalance could be detrimental in the long term. More money needed to be coming from within the region, and foreign government funding needed to become a much smaller percentage of the whole.

To that end, the Obama administration should consider a number of ideas to stimulate local and international private funding for the region to support civil-society initiatives. For instance, the United States, through the NED's Center for International Private Enterprise or the U.S. Chamber of Commerce,

could do more to share with local firms in Arab states its model of corporate donations in foreign capitals. Through its embassies, the U.S. government could also be encouraged to organize private foundation delegations in the same way the embassies send business delegations. A larger focus on twinning localities in the United States with Arab states could also be important in this regard. There was some discussion among participants of models to build on, including that of a "council of donors" that could convene periodically in Washington to encourage internationally diversified private-sector investment. A similar mechanism perhaps could be placed in the context of the G8's Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative. The United States' greatest power is the power to convene—so why not encourage teleconferencing to link more potential private-sector partners together? Why not do more with online business fairs and exhibitions?

Although government-funded programs enjoy a certain "economy of scale" and other particular advantages that only governments provide, they can also be hindered by bureaucratic constraints and resource mismanagement, an objection shared by several participants. Philanthropists, private foundations, and for-profit companies investing in the nongovernmental sector, on the other hand, could spur job creation and provide opportunities for historically underemployed segments—notably, women and youth—of these societies.

Arab youth remain the region's largest potential strength—and weakness. A literate, well-educated, and well-trained youth population, raised in an age of globalization and better able to bridge cultural divides, can help make the region a productive contributor to the global community. Absent the right kind of opportunities, the region will suffer the effects of adverse labor migration trends, a "brain drain," and an ominous rise in criminal and/or extremist activity.

Why Is Support of Arab Democrats in the U.S. National Interest?

AS MENTIONED IN THE INTRODUCTION, encouraging the Obama administration to advance democracy in the Middle East is not making an argument that doing so would be in our national interest. Indeed, within the Washington policymaking community a growing consensus suggests that the promotion of democracy in the Middle East is not in the national interest—that promoting democracy puts the United States at odds with the states of the region, inhibiting our ability to pursue our “true” national security interests: protecting Israel, safeguarding the flow of oil, challenging Iran, and stabilizing Iraq.

This argument misses the central point and, in any case, is out of step with the Middle East of the early twenty-first century. During the Cold War decades, the United States pursued a “realist” policy of safeguarding to varying degrees the core interests listed above. But in doing so, it ignored how America’s allies within the region failed to develop their economies even as they became increasingly repressive. As a consequence, al-Qaeda’s global narrative resonated with an Arab public looking for excuses to explain the failure of their societies to evolve in the roughly six decades since independence. Ultimately, this inattention contributed to September 11. Today, the region as a whole swims in a sea of social pathology that will yield to no easy or short-term solutions, especially if long-term solutions are not pursued now. In short, a foreign policy of pursuing national interests, as realists have narrowly defined them, has failed.

Thus a policy of promoting political and economic reform in the Middle East is designed not to replace our core national interests, but to balance them with the need to create a fundamental stability in the region for the long term. The Bush administration was the first to add these issues to the agenda with the governments of the region; however, it ultimately found the trauma of Iraq and the temptation to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict too difficult to overcome. But the reform agenda is now a recognized option for the

region and it will not go away. The Obama administration will have no choice but to assist Middle Eastern governments with their efforts to modernize. The question is whether the new administration will also insist that the governments do so in a manner that protects human, civil, and political rights.

A process of democratization also contributes to countering radicalization, albeit indirectly. Ultimately, defeating extremism requires providing myriad alternatives for young people, particularly young men in the region who are frustrated because they have few opportunities for a better, more-advanced education and a job, not to mention a career. Many youths in the region today cannot contemplate the prospect of moving out of their parents’ home and getting married. They feel in so little control of their lives that they are particularly susceptible to extremist ideology with a convenient worldview that explains their current circumstances: the United States, Israel, and (more broadly) the West are in league with their own corrupt governments in a war on Islam that is designed to keep Muslims down. Regional microprojects of vocational training, English language classes, cultural exchanges, and the like are all means of countering this virulent worldview, but institutional reform is the most durable solution.

Pursuing economic and political reform begins to create alternative opportunities as transparency and accountability (usually in the form of a free press) accelerate official reform initiatives. Political scientists tell us that healthy societies tend to be governed from the center, with small tails representing the extremes. By working with governments and societies in the region to democratize, the United States seeks to foster such healthy societies. Much like the countries of Latin America after the “third wave” of democratization, the resulting societies are not necessarily friendly to the United States, but they are not instantly hostile to it either. Citizens in such societies are much more preoccupied with improving their own day-to-day lives than with destroying ours.

As evidenced in the preceding summary of the Amman dialogue with Arab democrats, a secondary question always arises whenever one considers how or whether the United States should push for greater political openness in the region: what does the United States do about political Islamism? That religious parties can be a part of democracy has been definitively answered in countries as diverse as Israel, Indonesia, and India, the latter two having the largest Muslim populations in the world. However, in the Middle East, the history and teachings of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Algeria's bitter experience during the "lost decade," raise the perennial fear that allowing Islamists

Perhaps nowhere in the Middle East is the question of the United States and democracy promotion as critical as it is in Iraq. The Amman dialogue indicated that Arab democrats were hopeful the Obama administration would help the Iraqis succeed in their experiment with democracy before withdrawing all American troops. On this point, President-elect Obama's statements both before and after the campaign are encouraging. Whenever he has spoken about Iraq, he has promised to do more to help Iraqis if they do more to take on their responsibilities politically as well as militarily. The first year of his administration will test the premise on both sides.

"For the United States, then, the focus should not be on whether Islamists can participate politically, but on whether the political system is sufficiently open to allow others to compete with them."

to participate in the political process may cause the state to be suborned from the inside. This fear is typically reflected in the phrase quoted earlier: "One man, one vote—one time."

As indicated in the summary of the Amman dialogue, Islamism represents a powerful and abiding political current within most countries in the region. It cannot be constrained by force. A number of countries, including Morocco, Yemen, Jordan, and Bahrain, allow Islamist parties to participate in the political process. So far, they are participating peacefully within the bounds of the system, believing their participation will ultimately lead to a sharing of power. For the United States, then, the focus should not be on whether Islamists can participate politically but on whether the political system is sufficiently open to allow others to compete with them. If viable political alternatives cannot provide enough competition, the tide of Islamism may rise irreversibly. The salient point here is that the United States should be unwavering in its focus on pluralism and always look to institutional solutions rather than relying on a given state's willingness or ability to repress its citizens.

Iraq holds two major elections in 2009—provincial elections in January and parliamentary elections in December. If the Obama administration can help Iraq get through what promises to be a difficult year, and the elections bring constructive new approaches into the political system, the U.S. ability to exit Iraq with the country on a positive path will be greatly enhanced. The converse is also true, however: a failure to pay appropriate attention to Iraq's democratic process during 2009 could prove cataclysmic, especially given the increasing militarization of Iraqi society. The Obama administration should make very clear that it supports the democratic process in Iraq and will do everything in its power to strengthen the democratic institutions of the state, particularly during this critical year of elections.

Regarding elections in the region more generally, the Obama administration should reiterate in its "vision of democracy that goes beyond the ballot box" that elections themselves do not a democracy make. Democratic institutions, beginning with a free press but also including powerful legislatures, independent judiciaries, and NGOs, are essential for creating a healthy, sustainable

democratic society. Yet the question remains open as to how to establish effectively and sustain such institutions. Some can be established through executive fiat, but most others will evolve. Here, elections—the sine qua non for a democracy—prove critical. Elections mediate citizen demand for such institutions and contribute to transparency and accountability within them. Wherever they take place—which is almost everywhere in the region today—the United States should come out clearly and firmly for continued improvement in the electoral process. The system will not be perfect in most cases; indeed, our own system has never been perfect. Nonetheless, the trajectory toward greater openness should be assessed with each iteration of the process.

As elections become more accurately representative of the people's will, the United States should also be clear with the people of the region that electing leaders does not automatically mean that the United

States will be on good terms with the resulting government. We are a nation of interests, and while we can respect the will of a society to elect whomever it wants to elect, every country continues to have rights as well as responsibilities in the international system. As perhaps the most active player in that system, the United States has expectations that every party in power will abide by the international "rules of the game." A country can choose to play by these rules or not, but when they do not, there will be consequences that have nothing to do with whether the United States "accepts the results" of a given election. An extreme example of this was the election of Adolf Hitler as chancellor of the Weimar Republic. The United States and other world nations recognized that Hitler's election represented the clear will of the German people, and yet his policies in Europe quickly became unacceptable to the rest of the international community. Other such examples abound in recent history.

Conclusion

BARACK OBAMA'S ELECTION as the forty-fourth president of the United States created profound expectations for fundamental change in U.S. foreign policy, in particular toward the Middle East. The region's governments hope he will discard the Bush administration's foreign-policy themes and modalities, including those associated with the Freedom Agenda. The region's democratic activists, too, hope for a new spirit of cooperation with the United States, but at the same time they hope that the new U.S. president does not go so far as to jettison key U.S. foreign-policy goals when it comes to establishing standards to assess their governments' adherence to international conventions on human rights and good governance.

One theme that appears throughout the Amman dialogue's summary is that Arab democratic activists clearly hope and expect that the new U.S. administration learns from the mistakes of its predecessor—but to this they add another hope: that the Obama administration will not make the opposite mistake of returning to the status quo ante, especially when perceptions cast the United States as caring only about oil and stability in the region. Ultimately, government by the people and for the people is the best guarantor of a nation's stability and resilience. This was the credo on which the United States was established, and it remains the single most important idea the United States can share with a world plagued by the menacing vision of Osama bin Laden and his ilk.

Participants

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“Determination, continuity, patience—and not holding democracy hostage to other issues and vice versa—all are elements vital to pursuing a long-term policy of advancing political and economic reform in the region.”

