Pushback or Progress?
Arab Regimes Respond to Democracy’s Challenge

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IN RECENT YEARS, from within and without, Arab regimes have faced a democratic challenge. Originally, this challenge arose from domestic, reform-minded groups frustrated by the shortcomings of their governments and the failings of Arab rulers over many years. Increasingly, Arab states were falling further behind other countries in areas such as living standards, civic rights, treatment of women, and responsiveness to rapid changes in the world.

This effort was joined and reinforced by Western, especially U.S., policies. Finally, around 2004, Islamist groups also began to demand more civic rights and freer elections. By 2006, however, the impetus toward democracy—at least as a high-profile agenda—began to fade. One reason for this decline was the relative success of Islamist groups in using the issue for their own purposes. But paramount was the way in which incumbent Arab regimes dealt with the question.

Arab regimes usually neutralized the democratic challenge by using a multilayered response that included repression, redefinition, and co-optation. In some cases—which deserve more attention than they have received to date—governments even made some domestic changes. Clearly, every country managed the issue in different ways.

What is most significant, however, is not that the democratization project was largely a failed effort, but rather that the way regimes responded to this challenge is defining how Arab governance will work in the coming decades. Assessing whether Arab regimes will become weaker and more unstable because of this reaction, as well as how such efforts have affected the relative chances of competing forces in the future, is extremely important.

Although the balance differs in each country, the main responses include reassertion of a traditional agenda, delegitimization of opponents, repression and harassment, pretense or co-optation, and, finally, actual reforms. Both liberal and Islamist oppositions have adjusted in this process, and the strategies of both are examined in this paper.

Punishing dissidents is the most obvious way of silencing democratic and liberal forces; however, that is only one tool of many in the Arab regimes’ repertoire. Punishment would be far less effective on its own than as part of a broader game plan including a wide range of strategies, among them the following:

- Mobilizing the masses around a positive program that promises them success, although the victory might be one of feeling better rather than material improvement of their lives.
- Offering an alternative interpretation of the facts to suggest that reform or democracy would be damaging.
- Harnessing nationalist and religious sentiments in the service of the regime and as enemies of reform.
- Discrediting dissidents as traitors among the general population.
- Inflicting costs on dissidents that might include death, imprisonment, torture, injury to their families, loss of jobs and positions, forbidding them to travel abroad, making them unpopular and dishonored, or forcing them into exile. For every person punished, dozens more would be intimidated, making them stop, decrease, or redirect their activism to avoid suffering a similar fate.
- At the same time, for every negative treatment, a positive one exists—carrots as opposed to sticks. People can be offered money, jobs, honors and privileges, patronage, and so on to get them to either cooperate or be quiet. Again, for each individual directly affected, many observe such things and act as the regime prefers to gain such benefits for themselves. Humans are more often weak, meek, or selfish than heroic. From this perspective, the best thing of all is to appear heroic while selling out.
Making people fear that reform or democratization brings the risk of chaos or an Islamist takeover. This weapon is especially effective in persuading people who would otherwise advocate change to cling to the status quo. It is all the stronger because it has a material basis in truth, especially given the presence of Iraq as a vivid example. Of course, that country’s instability and bloodshed is in part caused by those who want it to serve precisely as a negative example instead of a model that encourages emulation.

Persuading the large traditionalist and conservative bloc, often a majority of the population, that the existing government and status quo is preferable to liberalization. This task is often easy. At the same time, by resisting changes—and posturing as both pious rulers and combatants against the West and Israel—regimes can win over even those who might otherwise be radical Islamists.

At the same time, regimes can tell would-be liberals they must support their rulers against Islamists, and tell would-be Islamists that they must support their rulers against liberals. The inherent contradiction in this argument does not prevent it from working.

Pretending to be the real reformer. Governments have increasingly figured out how to act as if they themselves are the main advocates of democracy and implementers of reform. Many ways exist to do so: conferences, rhetoric, promises, fixed elections, creating their own substitute institutions (like state-sponsored human rights groups), and so on. These efforts are also often successful in fooling the Western media, governments, and others—or at least they give them an excuse not to take action or criticize.

Finally, of course, some regimes actually do make reforms, although such measures often face popular opposition. The clearest examples are Morocco, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain. Perhaps Jordan, to a lesser extent, could also be listed as an example.
THE FOLLOWING ANALYSIS and examples are typical cases of different responses by regimes and reform movements.1

Blaming the Usual Suspects
Perhaps the single most active and consistent measure among regimes was to reinforce and revitalize the existing Arab nationalist ideology, which already offered significant defenses against the democratic challenge. Basically, the argument espoused is that the key danger facing the Arabs is Western—especially American—imperialism, Zionism, and their collaborators among Arab rulers or intellectuals. This threat is to be countered by Arab unity in general and solidarity around their existing, legitimate leaders.

The argument contends that, given the threat of imperialism (both American and Western generally) and Zionism, democracy is not only a distracting luxury and still one more example of Western hypocrisy but also an integral part of the conspiracy against the Arabs. For example, in January 2001, Syrian information minister Adnan Omran proclaimed that civil society was an “American term” and that “neocolonialism no longer relies on armies.” Rather, the argument goes, the enemy attacks by using subversion through cultural products and political ideas.2

The West was said to be attacking the Arab world, sometimes used interchangeably with Islam itself, on many fronts: not only the traditional Arab-Israeli one but also in Iraq, Lebanon, and many other places, using economic, intellectual, and cultural as well as military weapons. The response required uniting around one’s own leaders, which meant the local regime in particular. The “war on terrorism” was reinterpreted as a war on Arabism or Islam. Polls showed that these claims had great appeal. A variation on these themes was to focus directly on the revitalization of Arab nationalism, which was often mixed with Islamism, or at least to emphasize Islam both to undermine the Islamist opposition and to strengthen the appeal of nationalism.

A particularly powerful use of this measure was the development of the concept of “resistance,” especially in Syria. This idea was most clearly laid out in Syrian president Bashar al-Asad’s speech to the Fourth General Conference of the Syrian Journalists Union on August 15, 2006.3 Although his rhetoric was far more extreme than that of other Arab leaders, the same basic ideas could be found throughout the Arab-speaking world in diluted form, especially in the majority of the media. He offered an alternative interpretation of the problems of the Middle East and possible solutions counter to those offered by advocates of reform, cooperation with the West, and democratization.

According to Bashar, the Arab world’s principal problem was not underdevelopment or dictatorship but the threat to mind and spirit, identity, and heritage from a “systematic invasion.” To make matters worse, many Arabs had betrayed their fellows through the “culture of defeat, submission, and blind drifting” that accepted the enemy’s plan. To change course was tantamount to embracing extinction.

For Bashar, the democratization and moderation program was merely a cover for the “submission and humiliation and deprivation of peoples of their rights,” to be killed without mercy and enslaved without appeal. “They wanted Israel to be the dominating power in the Arab region, and the Arabs would be laborers, slaves, and satellites revolving in the Israeli

1. Far more detailed and extensive documentation, as well as multiple examples of these points, are provided in the author’s books: The Truth about Syria (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2007); The Long War for Freedom: The Arab Struggle for Democracy in the Middle East (New York: John Wiley, 2005); and The Tragedy of the Middle East (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
orbit.” As an example, he gave Iraq, whose “destruction and ruination” had taken the country back to the Stone Age. The same point applies to the Arab-Israeli peace process of the 1990s. Bashar’s diagnosis was that the Arab mistake had been to adopt diplomacy and cancel “all the other options.”

Regarding the moderate Arab bargaining position, Bashar characterized that as “to offer everything to Israel” and get nothing at all. The Arab mistake, according to Bashar, however, was not in rejecting compromise, but in not even considering rejection as an option. By trying “to appease Israel and the United States,” they abandoned intimidation and ensured the indifference of the rest of the world. Instead of pressuring and criticizing Israel, he said, the West demands things like better treatment for Syrian dissidents, or the United Nations passes resolutions protesting about massacres in Sudan. This is what happened when the Arabs wasted their time “discussing and negotiating with ourselves, convinced about a promised peace with an imaginary party that is [in fact] preparing itself for its next aggression against the Arabs.”

Bashar then stirred up passions quite effectively. Not only was it more heroic to fight the West and Israel while rejecting change, but also it was more likely to be effective. “If wisdom, according to some Arabs, means defeat and humiliation, then by the same token, victory means adventure and recklessness.” His model was the Hizballah-Israeli war of 2006, in which he proclaimed a victory not only over Israel but also over the treacherous Lebanese majority that had opposed Syrian domination. Hizballah had not only won, he claimed, but its actions had been wildly popular in the Arab world. This all proved that Arab nationalist sentiment had not declined at all, a thing of the past to be replaced by liberalism, but it “is at its peak.”

If an unfavorable balance of power exists, righting it is only a matter of willpower, which will be applied “when we decide—and the decision is in our hands—to overcome this gap.” He summed up the strategy of willpower over material power in the following words: “We have decided to be weak, but when we decide to be strong this balance will be changed.” As for the global community, UN Security Council, or other countries’ views, their opinions need not be taken into consideration: “National decisions take precedence over any international resolution, even if this leads to fighting or war.”

This statement did not mean that other Arab regimes, even Syria itself, were eager for war or that more-moderate governments wanted a confrontation with the West. But they did want to use this kind of rhetoric to stir up pro-government emotions. The real line of conflict did not stand, as the United States or local reformers said, between the dictatorships and their own people but rather between all Arabs—from top to bottom—and their outside enemies.

Delegitimizing the Democratic Opposition

Clearly, the reinforcement of the Arab nationalist narrative—buttressed by the partly contrasting Islamist one—tended to delegitimize the democratic opposition. This practice was also followed in a far more direct manner. Reformers were branded as traitors and subversives. In the milder version, they were unintentionally doing the devil’s work, although ultimately this ignorance was counted as no excuse.

Many examples of this situation could be offered, but one of the clearest was the Saad Eddin Ibrahim case in Egypt. Ibrahim, one of the Arab world’s best social scientists, headed the Ibn Khaldun Center, a think tank. After Ibrahim and his center examined such sensitive issues as fixed elections, the treatment of the Christian minority, the quality of Egyptian schools, and the purported plan of President Hosni Mubarak to name his son as successor, in 2000 the government launched a major campaign to discredit Ibrahim. He and his staff were arrested; the center was closed; and its staff was charged with embezzlement, receiving foreign funds illegally, defaming Egypt’s reputation, and bribery. In May 2001, Cairo’s Supreme State Security Court found them all guilty and gave twenty-two defendants suspended sentences; it ordered Ibrahim to serve seven years’ hard labor for “harming society’s interests, values and laws.”

Although direct repression was certainly one instrument used, what was ultimately more important was
the ability to convince Egyptians that the regime was their friend and the reformers were their enemies. Both these tactics, of course, discouraged others from following Ibrahim’s example. And when foreigners criticized the treatment of Ibrahim or tried to help him, this action became another weapon used in the government’s campaign of discrediting its rivals.

The editor of a pro-government weekly wrote, “Those who ally themselves with foreign quarters to harm Egypt’s national security . . . should be executed in a public square.” He sneered that Ibrahim’s supporters thought defending his “crime” was more important “than defending Iraq and Palestine.” Those advocating civil society and human rights in Egypt were merely proving themselves to be Western lackeys threatening to lead Egypt into an “age of darkness.”

Repressing Reformers
Although Ibrahim was eventually released from prison and continued to voice his views, such intimidation was effective. A number of groups shifted their attention from domestic human rights to safer, populist issues, such as supporting the Palestinian intifada and condemning sanctions against Iraq. In other words, organizations that might otherwise criticize the governance of their own country and demand change were co-opted into being allies of the regime, furthering its trump issues and foreign policy agenda.

An infinite variety of repressive acts were used. On one end of the spectrum, Summir Said, an Egyptian working for the Reuters bureau in Cairo, was threatened by the secret police in 1996. In Syria, the government denied an operating permit to the National Organization for Human Rights in 2006. Such actions lie at the lower end of the scale of repression. Merely calling in a dissident for questioning (which might include threats) or a brief jail term might be expected to yield results.

But regimes do not hesitate to throw into prison for longer terms individuals seen as rallying points for democratic oppositions, such as Fathi al-Jahmi in Libya, Ayman Nour in Egypt, or Michel Kilo in Syria. Again, every country is different, with Morocco and Jordan, for example, preferring co-optation to repression, except in the case of clearly violent oppositionists.

Repression is often multilayered. For instance, the influential Kurdish cleric Mashuq al-Khaznawi was murdered in Syria under suspicious circumstances that made the murder appear to be a government operation. When his son accused the regime of the deed, he was arrested and so were forty-nine Kurds who participated in a rally demanding to know the truth about the killing.

With its enormous resources for buying off dissent, Saudi Arabia and the other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates) rarely resort to force. In February 2007, for example, Saudi authorities arrested ten men on suspicion of funding terrorism, although their actual sin was apparently planning to form a political party. Three of them had previously signed a petition calling for free elections. And typical, too, of Saudi Arabia, those demanding reforms were Islamists. The petition accused the government of preventing reformers from traveling abroad, closing internet sites, banning public demonstrations, and threatening state employees with dismissal for expressing opinions contrary to government policy.

In effect, this minor incident reveals a lot about the nature of the current struggle. On one hand, some Islamists are using the democracy card and employing nonviolent methods, although others continue to engage in terrorism. On the other hand, the regime wants to brand these dissenters as being linked to terrorism, which also has the advantage of appearing to be a viable reason for suppression in Western eyes as well as scaring Saudis.

Still, no country is the equivalent of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, where a word of criticism could lead to torture and murder. Although countries can define what is a misdemeanor or a felony, some relative scale usually exists in terms of letting the punishment fit the crime. Perhaps the most repressive regime, other than Syria,

is Libya. Its leader, Muammar Qadhafi, openly called on his supporters to kill anyone who asked for political change in the country. “If the enemy shows up you must finish it off because the enemy [wants] to exterminate you. We cannot tolerate that the enemy undermines the power of the people and the revolution.”

It should be remembered, however, that when threats against liberals come from Islamists, the regime usually does nothing to protect the liberals or punish those making—and sometimes implementing—such threats. In such circumstances, the radical Islamists become an arm of regime interests for all practical purposes. An example is the publication in May 2006 on a Saudi Islamist internet site of a statement condemning reformists as dangerously anti-Islamic Westernizers whose signers included government officials such as judges and employees of the education department. If anyone working for the government had signed a parallel reform manifesto, he would have been immediately fired.

**Warning of Islamist Gains and Instability as a Risk of Democratization**

Fearing that a loosening of political and social bonds might lead to instability was a real and logical concern for many liberals, even though a few—notably Saad Eddin Ibrahim—backed the Islamists’ bid for electoral legitimacy against the regime. More commonly, however, reformers could look at the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, or how an impending election of Islamists in Algeria, blocked by a military coup, then brought on a long and bloody civil war. Iraq was also a warning of what might happen; for aside from an Islamist takeover, many countries—notably Syria and Lebanon—faced ethnic strife. Turkey, too, though less often cited, showed how Islamists could win elections. And, more recently, gains by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and an election victory for Hamas in the Palestinian Authority drove the lesson home. Even the rise of low-level insurgencies, as in Saudi Arabia, set off warning signals of what might potentially happen. In light of all these things, the status quo did not look so bad for many people.

Regimes found many ways of incorporating these issues into their rhetoric. For example, Saudi interior minister Prince Nayif bin Abd al-Aziz, in charge of that government’s counterinsurgency campaign, told his people that al-Qaeda was a Western front group, part of an overall effort to sabotage Saudi Arabia, of which liberalization was another tactic.

The growing power of Islamists is clearly evident and has been enhanced by elections. Aside from state balloting, the professional organizations, whose leaders are elected in relatively fair elections, have become dominated by Islamists in, for example, Egypt and Jordan. Even though the Islamists are enemies of the regime, the government often favors their activities over those of liberals. This bias is because the Islamists often—though, of course, not always—produce parallel ideas that reinforce the regimes’ positions, and the Islamists’ strength also frightens people into supporting the regime. As one Egyptian analyst has written: “Propagators of extremist [Islamist] thought are given a free hand to spread their ideas by all means (as long as they are not overly critical of the regime). On the other hand, efforts by civil society are systematically obstructed.” On programs broadcast on state television, Islamist preachers condemn liberals and reform while not being allowed to voice negative remarks about the regime.

Aside from their “objective cooperation” with the government, the Islamists also block a movement for reform in their own right, even if they support fairer elections as being in their own interest. As the Syrian researcher Burhan Ghalioun put it, also indicating the heightened pessimism of liberals:

> The main problem… is that the clerics have become the leading shapers of public opinion.…. Arab societies are held hostage by two authorities: [One is the] political dictatorship.…. [The other is] …the clerics—even those opposing these regimes—who tyran-

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nize Arab public opinion nowadays…. There is a kind of undeclared, practical alliance between the political dictatorship and the dictatorship of the religious authority [which accuses reformers] of secularism, which means heresy, or by accusing them of modernism, of having ties with the West, or of collaborating with colonialism. In their conduct, they do not really differ from the Arab dictatorial regimes…. They have won the war of culture.8

Consequently, as Bruce Maddy-Weitzman explains in discussing Tunisia:

The…elites and middle class alike, fearful of the consequences of a rising political Islam in a society noted for its relatively liberal and secular ambience, essentially agreed to their indefinite political emasculation in return for the regime’s repression of the Islamist movement and the maintenance of a liberal economy and the existing legal and social frameworks.9

Pretending Reform

Arab rulers and their supporters—including government employees in the media, education, and even religious institutions—often stress that their countries are already wonderfully governed and truly democratic. In Qadhafi’s words, “Our political path is the correct one as it grants freedom to the whole people, sovereignty, power and wealth to the whole people.”10

An easy and low-cost response is for governments to state that they have already made reforms, are in the process of doing so, are studying such measures, or will do so in the future. Many have made such statements and claims. Entire supposedly civil-society institutions are created under state control to propagandize for the government’s virtue and to crowd out independent counterparts.

For example, Bahrain created a High Council for Women that was used, according to a women’s rights activist there, to hinder nongovernmental women’s societies and to block the registration of the independent Women’s Union for many years. In Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Abdullah established a forum for national dialogue and invited a wide variety of people to attend; but the recommendations arising from these discussions, held in a beautiful building created solely to house the meetings, were very conservative and at any rate had no effect. In the media, al-Watan, itself owned by a prince, ran more-liberal articles, but then its editor, Jamal Khashoggi, was fired by the regime shortly after criticizing clerics for supporting Islamist terrorists. Hussein Shobokshi was allowed to publish an article describing a liberal future Saudi Arabia in an English-language paper but not in Arabic and then lost his column as a result.

Prince Sultan bin Turki bin Abdul-Aziz made liberal pronouncements but then was reportedly lured by Saudi officials to a meeting in Geneva, drugged, and forcibly returned to house arrest in Riyadh.11 In March 2004, the Saudi government approved the establishment of an official human rights association, whose members flew off to London to explain how the kingdom was moving toward liberalization. A few days later, thirteen prominent independent liberals were taken into police custody, charged with endangering national unity. Those who promised not to petition for reform or talk to reporters were quickly released.

A useful gimmick of regimes is to create their own human rights or civil-society groups, which can then be guaranteed not to cause any problems for the government. In the Saudi case, Defense Minister Prince Sultan explained that dissidents were those rebelling “against their fathers and their country” and thus could not expect support from the state-backed human rights body. “I urge you not to think that the national human rights association was founded to assist offenders” against the law, he said. The new chairman of this National Organization for Human Rights, Abdallah bin Salah al-Ubayd, explained that “there are those

who consider certain issues a violation of human rights, while we consider them a safeguard to human rights. For example, executions, amputating the hand of a thief, or flogging an adulterer.”

In Egypt, the state-backed National Council for Human Rights remains quite vague in its discussion of issues, including nothing that would offend the government, indeed avoiding any serious discussion of the country at all. The regime even sponsored a journal on democracy, producing more copies in English than in Arabic and publishing little about the Arab world and almost nothing about Egypt in its pages. In addition, the government presented its own reform program. Reformists did not expect any real change but were uncertain how they could respond effectively.

Similarly, many countries made promises of reforming education to make it more tolerance-oriented, but these promises were accompanied by little action or even high-level denials that any change would indeed be made. In Saudi Arabia, no government action was taken against 160 clerics, many of them government employees, who accused liberals of being traitors loyal to infidels and denounced educational reform as a plot by “the Zionist-Crusader government in Washington … to convert the Muslims to another religion.” If any government employees had made such strong statements demanding reform or liberalization, they would have been immediately fired.

Even the most transparent exercises were used by regimes to claim democracy. Although this strategy might not have been very effective, it certainly seemed to please the regimes themselves. In Yemen, Ali Abdullah Salih, who had ruled for twenty-eight years, had himself elected in 1999 with 96 percent of the vote and in 2006 by 77 percent. In 2000, Bashar al-Asad was elected president of Syria with 97.29 percent of the votes and in 2007 by 97.62 percent. Because his father was elected in 1999 by 99.9 percent of the votes, the 2 percent reduction in unanimity might be taken to represent the degree of democratic opening represented by his new regime.

Some Syrian parliamentary elections in 2007, for example, were also conducted without opposition candidates and with the regime’s party choosing two-thirds of the candidates as well as approving the remaining “independents.”

Making Limited Reforms

In some countries, the regimes actually moved toward significant reforms. The following examples are positive, but they come near to exhausting the list of changes. The smaller Gulf States (except for the United Arab Emirates) have held increasingly competitive parliamentary or at least municipal elections in the past several years, as has Morocco. Elsewhere, examples of real reform being actually implemented are hard to find.

In Bahrain, fair, multiparty elections were held in October 2002 despite a history of unrest from the majority Shiite Muslims against the minority, Sunni-controlled government. The opposition was legalized and security forces curbed. Kuwait also had periodic free and fair elections, with Islamists doing well but not gaining control of parliament.

A January 2004 event in tiny Bahrain illustrates the way things could be. Bahrain’s elected parliament held a special televised session to denounce alleged government corruption in managing the country’s pension funds. Members, including Islamists, demanded that accused cabinet members resign for making bad investments that benefited themselves, change the system, and return the lost money. One liberal member declared the special session showed the people that parliament was not a “rubber stamp” for the regime.

The government denied the accusations and presented its defense to the legislators. But a high official proclaimed himself “happy” to be part of “this historic day” on which Bahrain’s democracy showed itself so well. “The government supports the Parliament’s eagerness to exercise its monitoring role,” he added. “I am really

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proud of the work done by the special committee.”

In turn, parliamentarians praised the ruler’s democratic reforms and the government for its cooperation.

Still, even in Bahrain many questions arise about both government manipulation and the problems of Islamist gains. For example, Ghada Jamsheer, president of the Committee of Women’s Petition stated, “There is a lot of talk about progress and achievements in regard to women’s rights . . . . [But] on the other hand, the injustice and suffering continue.” She notes that although women can run for election and vote, those women who became parliamentarians in the forty-member legislative body did so—in one case—because the government put her in a district with few people and no competing candidate, and in the other ten by appointment because they supported the regime. These results might be construed in the government’s favor because it did not have to give 25 percent representation to women. Yet the point is that although the government was willing to have women in the council, it preferred they be loyal supporters. Jamsheer also charges that in the assembly, “As a result of government manipulation of elections, the majority . . . are members of Islamist groups who have other priorities than women’s rights. Many campaigners for human rights, including women, lost the election to Islamists backed by the government, as a result of using the floating votes of military men and newly nationalized persons.” If so, this is a good example of the government-Islamist alliance at work.

She also points out that although women became minister of health and social affairs, head of Bahrain University, and head of the UN General Assembly, only 8 percent of high government positions are held by women. Reforms, of course, do take time, and the key question is whether progress continues. Another issue is that the great majority benefit relatively little from these changes. Women still have great difficulties with divorce and child custody issues and, according to Jamsheer, the government is holding up a family law reform as a bargaining chip with the Islamists, another common problem. She concludes that the reforms so far are counterproductive: “The struggle for women’s rights in Bahrain has become more difficult. That is because of the new government approach and policies, which pretend to be the protector of women’s rights by implementing artificial and marginal reforms.”

Whether valid or not, this opinion certainly reveals the pessimistic tone of reformers today.

On some broader human rights issues, the system allowed more openness while setting strict limits. After the human rights activist Almazal Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja criticized Bahrain’s prime minister in a public lecture in October 2004, he was arrested, tried, and sentenced to one year in prison for “inciting hatred of the regime by publicly calling it corrupt.” His Bahrain Center for Human Rights was disbanded. Within hours of the sentencing, however, he was pardoned by the country’s monarch. Khawaja then stated he would continue his efforts on behalf of human rights. An undertone to the affair was that Khawaja, who had recently returned to the country after twenty-two years living in Europe, was a member of the Shiite Muslim majority in a country ruled by a Sunni Muslim dynasty. Thus, either repressing him or allowing democracy became immediately entangled in potentially explosive sectarian issues.

Similarly, consider Jordan, rightly seen as one of the most moderately ruled Arab states. In an article for a Western newspaper, former foreign minister Marwan Muasher explained that the Arab world must “take the initiative” in becoming more democratic. This change cannot happen overnight, of course, and forcing the pace could lead to radicalization. U.S. pressure to do so is “alienating Arabs and jeopardizing the efforts of genuine reformers, who now cannot advocate democracy without being accused of doing America’s bidding.” But the Arab world is ready to manage this transition.

19. Ibid.
itself. How do we know? Because, he explains, Jordan’s king and queen have endorsed the findings of the UN Arab Human Development Reports.  

But was this sufficient? Jordanians elected a new parliament in 2003, choosing mostly pro-government representatives. The elections were honest but unfair. Since the prime minister had dissolved the previous parliament two years earlier, he had decreed dozens of “temporary laws” that limited free speech, tightened press controls, and gerrymandered districts to ensure the regime’s victory. Amman, with a higher proportion of dissidents, had about one parliament member for 52,000 voters compared with just 6,000 people in Kerak, a regime stronghold. The number of seats was expanded from 80 to 110, giving more power to pro-government areas. As a result, Islamists received only 17 of 110 seats, far fewer than they might have won in a fair system. But if Islamists had won, the result would hardly be conducive to stability or holding any future elections, much less the changes required to raise living standards and expand civic rights.

The main concern of Jordan’s government seems to be to appease the Islamists without giving them any real power, while making empty promises of more consultation and partnership. At the same time, however, Jordanians do enjoy more freedom than most other Arabs. This greater openness probably provides an escape valve that reduces the level of Islamist violence in Jordan.

Jordan, then, is more of a democracy in appearance than in practice because elections are not fair reflections of the population’s views. In theory, parliament can dismiss the prime minister and cabinet; in practice, the opposite is more likely to happen. The king appoints all the senate’s members. Opponents of reform dominate the legislature, because they are either instruments of the regime or radical Islamists.

In Kuwait’s freely elected parliament, a variety of groups are represented—from Islamists, through tribal conservatives, to liberals, Sunni and Shiite—although the balance of power is still held by the monarch, in part through his ability to add unelected cabinet members to the chamber. As in Jordan, no organized liberal party exists as such, in part because the monarchy plays the role of reformer, albeit to a very limited extent. The Islamist opposition is partially co-opted by being allowed to have a sizable, but always minority, share of seats in parliament.

An important example of genuine reform, but in a limited sphere, has been the Tunisian educational system, even in the Islamic university, which stresses tolerance and a pluralistic interpretation of Islam. Tunisia has the most-advanced laws on gender equality in terms of rights and family law, which makes it stand all the more in contrast to the form and content of the educational process in other countries. At the same time, Tunisia was authoritarian and repressive, marked by fixed elections and a dismal human rights record. It is another example of how complex and contradictory is the situation with which reformers must contend.

Morocco has a lively civil society and strong women’s groups. King Hassan, who died in 1999, used the phrase “homeopathic democracy,” which meant, in Bruce Maddy-Weitzman’s words, “controlled, measured steps at political liberalization while the makhzen (the traditional term for Morocco’s ruling security-bureaucratic apparatus), headed by the monarch, continued to maintain overweening control.” His son and successor, Muhammad, quickened the pace of change. The slogan used was “development and ijtehad,” meaning something like modernization within the parameters of an enlightened interpretation of Islamic law, rather than merely imitating tradition. This strategy includes holding fair elections. The goal is to stabilize the regime, including recruiting of allies among liberals and women who will join it in opposing Islamism, as well as taking into consideration their goals and demands.

Particularly impressive, at least in relative terms, are the most recent steps toward democratization and reform in the smaller Gulf Arab states. Kuwait,

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Bahrain, and even Oman have allowed women to vote in parliamentary or municipal elections. And the 2007 Qatar municipal elections saw 51.1 percent of those eligible voting—almost half of them females. The polling went smoothly, and the voting stations were policed to avoid violations of law. “Gone are the days when people voted for members of their family or tribe. Now the voters are more critical and they are looking at the qualifications of the candidate and whether they are capable of doing some good job in their constituency,” said one voter.  

Of course, definite limitations and flaws still exist in the developments regarding Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar. Hereditary rule remains, and the royal families still dominate the system.

Generally, with the notable exception of Saudi Arabia, a greater dynamism at the bottom and flexibility at the top seem evident in the “reactionary” monarchies of the Gulf, Morocco, or Jordan, compared to the “progressive” Arab nationalist regimes that increasingly seem like the Soviet Union in the USSR’s most dinosaur-like period. Nevertheless, this “progress” is relatively more democratic and pluralist than some of the plausible, even more intransigent, alternatives. Also, fears of instability or an even worse regime caused by a too rapid or extensive change are not merely phony.

Reformist Responses

HOW DID THE REFORM movements respond to all these difficulties and pressures? Two general points should be emphasized:

First, the liberals were generally depressed and discouraged, seeing clearly their lack of progress and popularity as well as the obstacles put in their way. No doubt this situation prevented others from joining their ranks, making some of them reduce or abandon activism and contributing to splits in their ranks.

Second, seeing this disarray, liberals were strongly tempted to water down their arguments, sometimes coming to advocate radical and populist views long typical of their Arab nationalist and Islamist rivals.

Unattractive Alternatives
Especially difficult was the way in which liberals were caught between the two other far more powerful forces—Islamism and Arabism—that also competed for power. Given the likelihood that they could win even a truly free election, liberals had to contend with the continued power of Arab nationalist regimes and the potential takeover by Islamists.

Consequently, each individual and group faced an extraordinarily difficult choice. Because the main struggle was between the Arab nationalist regimes and the Islamists, liberals needed to consider taking sides. If they feared an Islamist takeover would lead to an even less free society, they might side with the government against the Islamists. The fact that the regime would reward them for doing so and that most reformers had a relatively Westernized, secular worldview—at least compared with the average in their society—were additional incentives. This pattern prevailed, for example, in Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. Even though Saudi reformers were highly religious compared with liberal counterparts in other countries, they faced the political alternative of an al-Qaeda regime.

Another possible choice was to side with the Islamists against the regime. This decision could arise from a deep hatred for the regime. Given his personal experience, Saad Eddin Ibrahim was understandably the most important liberal to take this road. In an article explaining why he advocated an alliance with the Islamists, Ibrahim showed how deeply impressed he was by the popularity with Egyptians of Hizballah, Hamas, Iran, al-Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood, and their leaders. “The pattern here is clear, and it is Islamic.” In contrast, the incumbent leaders of Arab countries are less popular. Egyptians are moving toward Islamism, he concludes, “More mainstream Islamists with broad support, developed civic dispositions and services to provide are the most likely actors in building a new Middle East.” Clearly, he sees the Islamists as the winning side and believes that because they cannot be defeated they must be co-opted.

Yet this strategy also coincides with a belief that the Islamists can be “tamed” by participating in the system or even in taking power. At times it has been suggested that having to develop pragmatic solutions to real problems and deal with the exigencies of electoral political life—if they could no longer merely repeat the slogan, “Islam is the answer!”—they would face splits and reduced popularity.

Other variants of this idea of alliance with the Islamists against the regime appeared most often (but not only) in Egypt, in part because Islamists successfully infiltrated the reform movement. A prime example took place within the Kifaya movement. When the group focused its criticism on the government of President Hosni Mubarak and such sensitive issues as his possible intention of making his son his successor, it was harassed and repressed. Thus, it turned to attacks on America and Israel instead, the historic distraction and scapegoating strategy of nationalists and Islamists. In a September 2006 meeting, attended by

both the Muslim Brotherhood and Kifaya leaders, they launched a campaign trying to get Egypt to repeal its peace treaty with Israel. Nevertheless, even engaging in such demagoguery did not help. The organization’s decline continued with a December 2006 demonstration attracting only 100 people.\(^2\)

Of course, liberals did not have to choose between alliance with Arab nationalist regimes or Islamists; they could keep their principled independence and criticize both sides. Many, in fact, did so. But this strategy was even more difficult to follow, isolating them to a greater extent and limiting any role they might play in actual events. And they could always hope to influence one of the far more powerful groups—the government toward greater openness or the Islamists toward more moderation.

Things were clearly not going well for the reformers. Kifaya, as a December 2006 Associated Press report on the organization stated, “is divided and demoralized its members split over a host of issues…. ‘Nobody is listening. They’ve demonstrated so many times but nothing has changed,’” said a young student watching a small Kifaya protest. Within the organization, Marxists, leftists, Arab nationalists, Islamists, and secular liberals battled each other. Indeed, some of Kifaya’s own members, “deep inside, are against democracy and reform,” said Bahay al-Din Hassan, director of Cairo Center for Human Rights Studies. One of those leaving Kifaya said its leaders were acting like “dictators.” Islamist leaders quit to protest Kifaya’s issuing a statement supporting Egypt’s culture minister, who had criticized the Islamic veil as a sign of “backward thinking.”\(^3\)

The reformist Wafd party also split when a leadership struggle ended in gunfire between two factions in a battle for control over the group’s headquarters. This conflict may well have been intensified by the provocations of infiltrating government agents who staged an internal coup. The ousted head of the party was arrested by the government.

The Problem of Inconsistency

Another serious problem is how willing the liberal forces are to respect democracy when it allows the expression of radical, undemocratic ideas. An interesting example took place in November 2006 when a columnist wrote in the Kuwaiti newspaper *al-Siyassa* that deposed Iraqi president Saddam Hussein was a hero and that the Arabs should support the Iraqi “resistance,” both positions contrary to those of Kuwait itself. In response, Kuwaiti information minister Muhammad al-San’usi said that the newspaper would be charged with “publishing reports that negatively impact Kuwaiti society.”\(^4\)

A further inconsistency was pointed out by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, an individual noteworthy for his experience as a reformer persecuted by Islamists, who subsequently reversed his support to favor the Islamists. Like Saad Eddin Ibrahim, the other best-known reformer turned defender of the Islamists, he argued that if liberals really wanted democracy, they would welcome the Islamists’ participation. Furthermore, he noted that because liberals mostly opposed Islamist participation, their position proved that what liberals really wanted was only “‘Democracy’ that will bring them to power, without their having to take it upon themselves to descend to the level of the ‘masses,’ the ‘rabble’—or, in more elegant terminology, ‘the man on the street’—and without having to rub shoulders with him and to understand his situation.”\(^5\)

To act this way, he concludes, is an “intentional falsification of the values of rationalism and liberalism.” The problem, of course, is that the liberal and reform movement is simultaneously one that advocates a specific method and a particular outcome. It argues that

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3. Ibid.
democratic norms are best but aims also for a large number of changes in society. To focus on elections in the context of the entire reform program brings up, in the form of radical Islamist movements, the well-known problem of authoritarian movements using democratic means to come to power.

Even if one restricts the scope of discussion to means rather than ends, the problem still remains, raising understandable concerns among reformers, of the use of anti-democratic methods in terms of argument (terming opponents as heretics and traitors) and strategies (violence, including incitement to kill). And beyond that lies doubt of the sincerity of democratic professions on the part of Islamists—the likelihood of what has been called, “One man, one vote, one time.” That is, if victorious, the Islamists would revoke the very democracy that brought them to power.

These are the difficult realities, not so much because liberals will be criticized for hypocrisy but because they genuinely face the potential triumph of an anti-democratic movement, or perhaps what should be called two anti-democratic ideologies—Arab nationalism and Islamism. Abu Zayd demonstrates this very point by revealing that he advocates the popular stance of subordinating everything to the struggle against foreigners. He writes:

Resistance is not "adventure," but rather the only existing option at the moment for our peoples, after

the [true] face of the modern Arab nation has been exposed…

You are against Hamas, against Hizballah, and against the Muslim Brotherhood because of their religious ideology. You are afraid that their growing stronger will lead to the establishment of religious states, but [by ignoring] Israel, you reveal that your liberalism and rationalism are not just phony; they are destructive rationalism. This is American rationalism, in which an idea is correct to the degree that it is useful.6

Although only a minority of liberals—and those mainly in Egypt—were willing to risk Islamist victory in the name of democracy, the liberals’ twin problems remain. Should they align with the nationalists against the Islamists or with the Islamists against the nationalists? Moreover, being so badly outnumbered, how can the liberals believe in their own victory—and why should others side with what looks like the far weaker party, one unable to provide them with benefits at the present or confidence of victory in the future?

Arab nationalists and Islamists certainly are in bitter conflict most of the time, but both of these ideologies are more popular than reformers, and they are willing (and by their doctrines, allowed) to use more extreme methods, fit better with the traditional or other prevalent worldviews, and are adept at employing demagoguery and xenophobia to succeed. Moreover, the regimes have a wide repertoire of tools—including both the Islamists themselves and fear of the Islamists simultaneously—to inhibit democracy and reform.

6. Ibid.
U.S. Policy Options

As so often happens with Middle East issues, this situation leaves the West, and the United States in particular, with unpalatable policy options. A primary emphasis on democratization is both unlikely to succeed and raises problems of its own. In this context, however, two policy themes appear reasonable.

First, support for reform and democratization should be an important part of the U.S. policy arsenal for several reasons. In the long term, the erosion of dictatorship and the mentality that accompanies it is the only way that regional problems might be solved. Dictatorship stands in the way of a more peaceful region, not to mention in the way of human rights, a decline in extremism, and socioeconomic progress. Such a policy is both morally right and expedient in terms of U.S. interests.

At the same time, however, the fact remains that the United States needs good political relations with key regimes for a variety of purposes, ranging from Iraq to the Arab-Israeli arena to the war against terrorism, as well as good economic and energy relationships. In addition, pressure on these regimes for reform and greater democracy could be destabilizing and bring on even more extreme and repressive governments, even though they may arrive in power through democratic means. And of course the existing regimes are likely to resist U.S. efforts to change them and may even turn such efforts into anti-American propaganda as examples of imperialistic interference.

The way to deal with this contradiction is not to ignore it but to develop a reasonably balanced policy that deals with both aspects. A stated policy of support for change and small-scale aid to reformers can accompany a realpolitik approach to alliances with Arab dictatorships. Achieving a balance has often been difficult for U.S. policy but that does not mean this strategy is incorrect.

For example, U.S. support for Egypt should not be predicated on a basic change in the Egyptian system, completely fair elections, or legalizing the Muslim Brotherhood but on more carefully defined points specific to U.S. interests: the more honest and proper use of U.S. aid funds, real help on U.S. efforts regarding the Israeli-Palestinian and Arab-Israeli conflict issues, and more regard for the rights of truly moderate dissidents. Similarly, with Saudi Arabia, a decline in anti-American incitement, a real effort to stop jihadists from going to Iraq, reduced permissiveness toward citizens financing terrorism, real help on Israeli-Palestinian issues, and some relaxation of repressive activities are reasonable demands. A complete revision of the Saudi system will neither work nor benefit U.S. interests.

Special recognition should be given to the fairly successful efforts of countries like Morocco, Jordan, and the smaller Gulf Arab states to evolve their systems in the direction of democracy. The United States should also not be afraid to intervene energetically, if verbally, on specific cases of human rights abuses. It does not have to endorse unfair elections, for example, and it should wage ideological struggle against both of the extremist ideologies that dominate the Arab world. After all, the United States provides a wide variety of strategic, diplomatic, and economic services to the relatively moderate Arab states, and it has a right to ask for things in return up to a reasonable point.

Every country is different in its mix of politics, ideology, problems, and policies. And this leads to another important point. With the exception of Saudi Arabia, a real distinction exists between more moderate and more extreme states, not only in the fact that the former are friendlier to the West and less aggressive externally but also in regard to their internal nature. Many criticisms can be made, for instance, against Egypt’s domestic policies and system. Yet Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco—to pick several relatively pro-Western countries—are genuinely more moderate and less oppressive than Syria, Sudan, or Iraq under Saddam Hussein.

The United States, then, can and should legitimately draw distinctions. Greater effort and a higher level of criticism or even sanctions can be used against the radical states precisely because they are radical.
The level of free speech or civil society in Egypt is far more open than that in Syria. Although the United States can be charged with being inconsistent or using criticism over dictatorship as a strategic tool, setting priorities along these lines makes sense not only in terms of national interests but also on the merits of the cases themselves.

Finally, the United States should make a realistic assessment of the situation. With the exception of the few countries mentioned, where progress is apparent, the democratic movements are not doing so well. Generally, they are lagging far behind the radical Arab nationalists—whose staying power should not be underestimated—and the radical Islamists. Even given the gains made by the Islamists, with the exception of the Palestinians, the Arab nationalist status quo is still winning. In short, the regimes’ strategy worked to turn back the democratic challenge. In the long run, things might turn out differently, but that is going to be a very long run indeed.
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