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Getting to the Core

Marina Ottaway and Thomas Carothers

THE JOURNEY TOWARD DEMOCRACY in the Middle East crosses territory that remains largely uncharted. As the chapters in this volume make clear, there are no simple answers to the problem of political transformation in the region. The experience of countries elsewhere in the world that have undergone or attempted democratic transitions in recent years offers valuable lessons but nevertheless only limited indications of what can be expected. The political history and circumstances of the Middle East are distinctive, and the evolution of Arab political systems will inevitably follow its own path.

To have a chance of success, democracy-promotion efforts in the Middle East will require new approaches carefully tailored to the regional circumstances, as well as a willingness to go beyond low-risk indirect approaches to take on the harder, more central challenges of expanding the depth and breadth of political contestation and encouraging real redistributions of power. Duplication of the kinds of democracy-promotion programs carried out in countries where authoritarian regimes had already fallen and the population looked to the West as a political model simply will not be enough. Strategies will need to take into account the complexity of relations between the Arab world and the West, as well as the special problems that make political change in the Middle East unusually difficult, particularly the possibility that the outcome could be considerably worse than the status quo. Without a realistic appreciation of and response to these factors, it is unlikely that the new rhetoric about promoting democracy in the Middle East will bear fruit.

Dealing with Credibility and Conflicting Interests

In attempting to promote democracy in the Middle East, the United States faces a situation in which its role as a prodemocratic actor is highly contested but at the same time clearly central. The political roles of European countries are much less controversial, but their actions, though potentially valuable, do not have the same weight and influence. In the Middle East, the United States is indeed the indispensable country, but it is also the target of much hatred.

As Marina Ottaway points out in chapter nine on the problem of credibility, the United States has no credibility in the Arab world as a prodemocratic actor. The likelihood that it will gain such credibility anytime soon is remote. Arab publics, as innumerable surveys make clear, simply do not believe the U.S. government is sincere when it talks about promoting democracy. Arab governments, while deeply annoyed at the criticism Washington metes out to them with increasing frequency, are not really convinced that in the end those rebukes will have real consequences. They do not believe that Washington will take steps that might destabilize long-standing allies and run the risk of making the Middle East an even more dangerous place than it already is.

A major reason for the skepticism about U.S. intentions by Arab publics is that the United States started pushing the democracy agenda at the same time as it started preparing for the war in Iraq. One of the main arguments used by the George W. Bush administration to convince Americans to support the war in Iraq—that the war would open the way for a democratic regime in Baghdad and that the change would have a demonstration effect on the rest of the region—has been given a sinister interpretation in the Arab world. When the United States talks of promoting democracy, many Arabs have concluded, it is really talking about forcefully removing regimes it does not like and replacing them with ones willing to safeguard U.S. interests. Democracy promotion is perceived as a dark, self-interested conspiracy rather than a generous attempt to improve the lives of Arabs and make the region a better, less dangerous place. Some Arabs do not even believe that the United States is interested in reform, except in the case of anti-American regimes, where it wants their elimination. Despite the new rhetoric, they are convinced, the United States remains quite willing to accept autocratic regimes when it suits its interests. Democracy pro-

motion, in other words, is for many in the region either a dark conspiracy or meaningless rhetoric.

It is nearly impossible for the United States to overcome this distrust in the short run. After all, it is a fact that the United States became concerned about democracy in the Middle East after September 11, at the same time as it started planning war in Afghanistan and Iraq. And it is a fact that members of the Bush administration hinted both during and after the Iraq war that Iraq might not be the only regime they would like to see removed—for example, Syria appeared to be another target. Most important, there is no doubt that U.S. interests in the Middle East are complex and contradictory, of which democracy promotion is only one, and in the day-to-day decision-making process, not the most important.

The contrast with the U.S. Cold War posture toward the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies is instructive. In that case, U.S. political, economic, and security interests dovetailed tightly. The existing regimes did absolutely nothing for the United States except provide a major security problem and competition for the allegiance of countries around the world. There was little apparent downside for the United States to push for their disappearance. The United States could support reformers and democracy with no significant interference from countervailing economic or security interests. This is not true in the Middle East at present. The autocratic regimes do not threaten U.S. interests directly, and many of them in fact serve significant U.S. security and economic interests quite well. The Saudi regime, for example, continues to keep the oil supplies flowing and to increase them when necessary to stabilize the market. U.S. security agencies count on cooperation from the repressive security forces of a number of Arab countries for vital help in tracking down terrorists.

Not only are U.S. interests in the region mixed and often mutually contradictory, but the underlying logic of the new democracy imperative is not persuasive to many Arab observers. Authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, the current U.S. argument goes, are a threat to the United States because their disastrous economic policies and repressive politics impoverish and frustrate their populations, and this in turn creates fertile ground for the growth of terrorists. In addition, the Wahhabis, who are spreading their intolerant ideology with Saudi support or at least willingness to look the other way, provide an ideological justification for the violence bred by poverty and political repression. But the link

between poverty and political repression on the one hand and terrorism on the other is open to question. The very poor are not usually the organizers of terrorist groups, as an analysis of the persons responsible for the September 11 attacks makes evident. And terrorist movements can grow in democratic countries as well—see the Irish Republican Army, the ETA in Spain, the Italian Red Brigades, and the German Baader-Meinhof gang. Most important, it is far from clear whether the present autocratic regimes, if they were to suddenly open up to deep-reaching political change, would be replaced by governments inclined to be friendly or helpful to the United States. U.S. security and democracy interests, in other words, do not neatly coincide in the Arab world at least in the short run—and it is the short run that drives most policy making.

Another major issue that makes it difficult for the United States to be accepted in Arab eyes as a defender of the interests of Arab populations against their autocratic leaders is U.S. policy toward Israel and the Palestinians. This is an issue on which U.S. and Arab views diverge radically, and will continue to do so, even if successful steps are taken toward a solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. From the Arab point of view, the creation of the state of Israel was a manifestation of imperialism and an act of aggression against them; and although most Arabs have come to accept that the situation is irreversible, the sense of injury persists. To the United States, the creation of the state of Israel was an act of justice, and support for Israel has deep roots in U.S. society.

In addition, there is the problem of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. That situation is not irreversible—most of the territory may well end up being returned to Palestinians, although the longer negotiations stall, the more likely it becomes that new land will be permanently annexed by Israel. Certainly, a resumption of negotiations on the issue is crucial to ease the tension between the Arab world and the United States. The problem, however, is that at present Arabs do not believe the United States acts as an honest broker. A positive settlement of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict—even something along the lines of the Taba settlement—would certainly reduce tensions between the Arab world and the United States but would probably not eliminate Arabs' strongly held belief that the United States cares much more about Israel than about them.

Neither the problem of credibility nor the related issue of conflicting interests will go away anytime soon. No matter which party is in the

White House, the United States and the Arab world will see the Palestinian–Israeli conflict through different lenses, the United States will remain dependent on Middle East oil, and Washington will look to the security services of many of the autocratic governments of the region for help on counterterrorism operations. These realities do not mean that the United States has no role to play in promoting democracy in the Middle East, but they must be factored into the new wave of U.S. policies and programs focused on supporting positive political change.

This means, for example, that the U.S. government must be willing to allow U.S. democracy-promotion organizations that it funds to have some real operational independence from the U.S. government, both in terms of the counterparts with which they choose to work and the methods they use. It means that U.S. democracy promoters will have to assume that many Arabs will be leery of working directly with U.S. democracy programs and that special efforts will have to be made to win their trust. In this regard, the situation is very much the opposite of postcommunist Eastern Europe. And more broadly it means that U.S. policy makers will have to show that they are capable of keeping their eye on the long-term imperative of democracy promotion and resist trading it off reflexively in the face of the many short-term pressures that will come along to delay or prevent a real effort to support real change.

European countries have been emphasizing the need for political reform and democracy in the Middle East for much longer than the United States, as Richard Youngs analyzes in his chapter. They will undoubtedly continue to do so, through the Barcelona Process and possibly in collaboration with the United States as part of the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative approved by the G-8 at their meeting in June 2004. European countries are not as controversial as the United States when they talk about democracy in the Middle East because they carry less baggage in Arab eyes. They have not launched the war in Iraq, and some have refused to support it. They are perceived as more even-handed in their dealing with the Arab–Israeli conflict and more willing to see Palestinians as victims of injustice rather than simply as perpetrators of terrorism. And they have been more soft-spoken in their dealing with Arab countries, thus a bit more credible than the United States when they talk about partnership. At the same time, however, the role of Europe is seen as secondary. Europe is not doing any harm to the Arab world, but it cannot be a central player in the way that the United States can.

Dealing with Arab Reality

In addition to dealing with their own problems of credibility, relevance, and conflicting interests, the United States and other countries concerned about democracy in the Middle East need to tailor their approaches more closely to the reality of the political situations prevailing in the region. In theory, Western policy makers and aid practitioners claim this is what they are doing. In practice, there is little clear evidence suggesting they are making serious efforts to identify the approach best suited to individual countries. Instead, many of them appear to rely on broad, often superficial assumptions. Among the most cherished is the idea that indirect approaches, such as supporting economic reform, civil society, and women's rights, are effective tools to facilitate democratization.

Indirect approaches to democracy promotion appeal as being relatively safe politically, attractive to domestic constituencies in donor countries, and not likely to provoke an immediate negative reaction by even autocratic host country governments, which strong pressure to reform institutions or allow real checks and balances would. Unfortunately, indirect approaches have so far produced few results in terms of stimulating real democratic change and will probably not be more successful in the future.

Various chapters in this volume examine strategies that have been central to U.S. and European efforts to promote democracy abroad in other regions, but that appear likely to have limited impact in the Arab world. Amy Hawthorne discusses the building of civil society and concludes that Western countries expect too much from it. Eva Bellin explores the complex ties between economic and political reform and cautions that economic reform is not a direct avenue to democratic transitions. Marina Ottaway's chapter on women's rights and democracy warns that although the improvement of women's rights is a worthwhile goal in and of itself, it bears little relationship to democracy promotion. A common and ultimately self-defeating tendency in all these strategies is the democracy promoter's preference for relying on individuals who profess their belief in democracy, rather than on organizations capable of building large-scale political constituencies. Constituencies are the missing element in political transitions in the Middle East.

Support for civil society organizations has been an important part of U.S. democracy promotion everywhere, an approach of choice in favor-

able situations and a solution of last resort when nothing else seems possible. It was a solution of choice in the early days of democracy promotion, particularly in Eastern European countries in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the permissive environment created by the disappearance of authoritarian regimes, and with populations lacking recent experience with democracy, encouraging civic activism appeared to be a sensible approach. In less permissive environments, with authoritarian governments still firmly in place and often barricaded behind a strong security apparatus, support for civil society appeared to be a way of at least keeping hope alive when all other avenues for democracy promotion were closed. In retrospect, the impact of civil society assistance has been limited even in permissive environments, creating a plethora of small organizations but not necessarily having much impact on government policy or even extending political participation much beyond a small cadre of activists. In the difficult environment of Arab countries, civil society organizations of the type Western donors fund have been especially ineffective and politically isolated, unable to establish a strong presence in a field where government-affiliated organizations, Islamic charities, and politicized Islamist groups dominate. Women's groups have scored some successes in altering legislation, but the most influential of these groups are those sponsored by host governments, often under the protection of the president's wife or women in the royal family.

Arab governments, furthermore, are learning quickly to play the civil society game. They are setting up their own government-funded and thus government-controlled human rights organizations, and allowing, even encouraging, prodemocracy nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and think tanks to organize domestic and international meetings of intellectuals and to issue statements, thereby helping give a democratic aura to the host government. What is missing, and what governments intend to prevent, are civil society organizations with large memberships. Discussions among individuals are fine, but discussions that involve membership-based organizations become threatening. The much-publicized meeting of civil society activists at the Alexandria Library in Egypt in early 2004 was, by design, a gathering of individuals, not of representatives of organizations.

Like Arab governments talking of reform, foreign democracy promoters want change, but without conflict and without changing the distribution of power sufficiently to threaten the incumbent governments and

raise the threat of instability. Democratization from the top is the ideal embraced by Arab governments, a surprising number of Arab intellectuals, and many foreign supporters of democratic change. This approach might work in countries where governments are strongly motivated to introduce change either by popular pressure or by a strong ideological commitment to change. But both of these elements are limited at best in the Arab world. Governments remain strong and are certainly not inclined to share power.

To the extent Arab governments are and feel challenged, it is not by democratic organizations, but by Islamist ones, which have a much broader popular base of support than the secular, elite organizations supported by the United States or Europe. There is a striking contrast in the Arab world today between the broad-based Islamist groups well integrated in their social milieu and the narrowly based organizations foreigners think of as civil society. The weakness of the democratic constituencies, the strength of the Islamist groups, and the continued reluctance of incumbent governments to take more than cautious steps toward reform constitute a formidable challenge to democracy for which the soft, indirect strategies are no match.

Getting to the Core

Significant progress toward democracy in the Middle East will only be achieved if the core features of democracy—giving citizens the ability to choose those who hold the main levers of political power and creating genuine checks and balances through which state institutions share power—are addressed. Unless these elements are achieved, Arab countries can undergo political reform, even significant changes that will make a difference in the lives of their citizens, without making progress toward democracy. As Daniel Brumberg makes clear in his chapter, many Middle East regimes are willing to become more liberal, as long as they can do so without seeing their power seriously challenged. Thus, they allow multiparty elections, a degree of freedom of the press, some limited political space for civil society organizations and political parties, but maintain reserved powers outside the domain of open competition and stunt the development of institutional checks and balances. They become liberalized autocracies rather than democratizing countries. And

the difference between even the most liberal of liberalized autocracies and a democratic regime is a qualitative rather than a quantitative one: A little more press freedom or greater space for prodemocracy NGOs will not turn Morocco into a constitutional monarchy, as long as the king is seen as the Commander of the Faithful, with power above that of all institutions because it comes from divine rather than human sources.

The transition from liberalized autocracies to democratizing regimes would require incumbent governments to cede real power both to citizens and to state institutions, such as judiciaries and legislatures, that can challenge their power. In theory, this could happen either because incumbent regimes decide to surrender power voluntarily—historically a rare occurrence—or because of the emergence of large, well-organized constituencies for democratic change capable of challenging those regimes successfully. In practice, this means either the growth of large social movements or of strong, well-organized political parties. These are the organizations that could bring about a redistribution of power, rather than simply a liberalization of existing regimes.

The idea of democracy has not always proven a good rallying point for the development of broad-based social movements and political parties. Marina Ottaway argues in her chapter on constituencies for democracy in the Arab world that abstract and process-oriented democratic ideals have not usually competed successfully with ideologies with an immediate popular appeal, such as nationalism, socialism, or religious ideals. However, democratic breakthrough can take place when parties or movements with a large constituency also accept democracy as a means of gaining access to power. The acceptance of democratic means by socialist parties, initially for purely instrumental reasons rather than out of conviction, was crucial to the democratization of some European countries. So was the rise of Christian Democratic parties in some Catholic countries. Nationalism also helped build constituencies for democracy at times. In the Arab world, the first, albeit very imperfect, steps toward democracy took place in Egypt, when the Wafd party in the 1930s and 1940s combined nationalism and democratic ideals in a successful challenge to the monarchy.

Today in the Middle East, the political organizations and movements with the largest popular constituencies are Islamist. Although many of these organizations, including the extremely influential Muslim Brotherhood, remain very hesitant to embrace democracy, Islamist groups will

be crucial to democratic transitions in the Arab world, in view of the present weakness of secular parties of all ideological persuasions and the important following the Islamists have. Unless such broad-based groups buy into the process, democratization will not take place. Unfortunately, at present, as Graham Fuller argues in his chapter, the evolution of Islamist groups toward acceptance of democracy is impeded by their sense of being under siege from the West—and from the United States in particular.

For countries that are seeking to promote democracy in the Middle East, the absence of the kind of broad-based constituencies needed to force autocratic governments to accept curbs on their own power creates serious difficulties. Such constituencies will have to be developed. They cannot be developed by the elite, technocratic civil society organizations with which Western countries can work comfortably. As a result, Western countries face the challenge of learning to deal with the organizations that have sizable constituencies, even if they are suspicious of the West and at best ambivalent about democracy. Attempting to understand such groups better, let alone trying to work with them, immediately pulls the United States and even European countries outside their comfort zone; but it has to be done.

As a complement to the building of constituency-based organizations, the development of institutions and processes that allow and channel political competition is also crucial for the democratic transformation of the Middle East. As Thomas Carothers elaborates in his chapter on democracy-promotion strategies, the broadening of the areas of political contestation is crucial to the transformation of the region. With the exception of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, all countries in the Middle East now formally allow some form of elections and have thus introduced some political competition in their political system. However, competition is limited and manipulated to the point of irrelevance in most countries. The head of government is typically protected from competition, either because he is a king, or because, as in Egypt, the president is elected by a tame parliament and approved by popular referendum, without competition. Where multiparty elections for the national leader do take place, as in Algeria, they are carefully bounded or manipulated. Parliamentary elections are also a model of noncompetition in many countries, with a large enough portion of the parliament appointed by the executive to ensure that even a wide margin elec-

tion victory by the opposition in the contestation for the elected seats will not give it control over the parliament and allow it to challenge the executive.

Reform of the institutions that permit competition is a complement to the development of organizations with broad-based constituencies. Neither is going to be effective without the other. Organizations that can command a popular following will never accept democracy if they do not see it as a means to bring about change, that is to say, if the country does not have genuine processes and institutions allowing open, fair political contestation. There is no good reason why an organization should abandon violent means in order to participate in an election that is meaningless by definition. Conversely, even the best-designed election laws and parliamentary reform would achieve little in the absence of political parties capable of building, and more importantly of sustaining, constituencies that want more than the overthrow of the incumbent regime and will not disintegrate right after the elections.

For democracy to become a reality in the region, major progress—well beyond limited liberalization—has to be made in opening up and improving core processes of political contestation. Three areas of possible change are critical. First, the range of permitted political parties should be broadened in many Arab societies and reforms of political party laws should be encouraged that would facilitate the strengthening of those parties that do exist. Although external aid for parties is no panacea in the effort to strengthen weak parties, it can be helpful. It is noticeable that the extensive world of Western political party aid that is so ubiquitous in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and other regions is only lightly present in the Middle East. Second, what elections are held should be made more free and fair, which requires much greater respect for political and civil rights. The establishment of strong, independent electoral commissions can also help improve elections. So too can allowing independent election monitoring, both by international election observers and nongovernmental domestic monitoring groups. The Arab world is one of the few parts of the world left where international and domestic election monitoring is not accepted as routine. Third, those institutions that are directly elected, such as legislatures and local governments, should be given more power. And the reserved political power kept out of reach of any direct public accountability and public choice should be progressively reduced. The redistribution

of basic political powers will require constitutional reforms, and the whole subject of constitutional reform deserves much greater attention than it is currently receiving.

All of these types of change are exceedingly difficult to achieve because they go to the heart of the power structures currently in place. Nevertheless, experience in other regions shows that progress is possible. These are areas in which the democracy-promotion community has extensive useful experience and much to contribute if it receives the necessary support. Unfortunately, Western democracy promoters, particularly in the United States, often feel under great pressure to demonstrate that they are accomplishing rapid results. Consequently, they feel driven to focus on what are often superficial manifestations of political change, such as whether a country holds elections, rather than the actual degree of political competition that the elections truly entail. For example, the decision by several of the small Gulf countries to hold elections has been hailed as a real breakthrough by the United States, although closer analysis suggests that these countries are becoming adept at playing the game perfected by liberalized autocracies and semiauthoritarian regimes: They are learning to open political space without allowing challenges to the status quo and to hold elections the opposition cannot possibly win.

Obviously it is very difficult for external actors to encourage recalcitrant, entrenched governments to open up their political systems to real competition. As Michele Dunne elucidates in her chapter, attempting to do so seriously requires an artful combination of sustained, nuanced diplomatic pressure and strategically designed aid interventions that take advantage of existing small openings and that help create inducements for new ones. As she shows, successful prodemocratic jawboning by the United States or other external actors is not a simple thing. And finding a way to give democracy aid providers enough independence to operate with some flexibility in a politically hypersensitive region, while still benefiting from the backing that diplomatic pressure can provide at key junctures, requires a balancing act that will tax even the most determined and skillful government. Moreover, trying to push a friendly authoritarian regime to allow true competition could lead to the political demise not only of specific leaders, but also of the underlying political system. For each Czech Republic that has moved almost seamlessly to democracy with nothing worse happening than an amicable divorce from

Slovakia, there are many messy, dangerous situations that developed during the 1990s as autocratic regimes fell. As a result, Western governments inevitably feel the temptation not to push for real democratization, or even not necessarily very hard for limited liberalization. Yet real options for getting to the core exist, if the United States and Europe are willing to take some chances and apply themselves seriously to a challenge that they themselves have identified as central to their own security.

Partnership through Differentiation

In most countries around the world where the established democracies are engaged in promoting democracy, the efforts of European and U.S. democracy-promotion actors are very similar on the ground, even though the different intervening countries claim to have a distinctive approach. While each democracy-promoting country tends to favor some types of programs over others, and has, in a manner of speaking, its own foibles and preferences, the differences tend to be fairly minor. Typically, almost all of the Western democracy aid in any particular country reaches a common set of state institutions and civil society organizations, with many of these institutions and organizations receiving support from multiple Western sources. Donor coordination, always invoked and rarely fully achieved, is important in democracy promotion precisely because there is so much similarity, and thus overlap and duplication, in assistance programs.

In the Middle East, particularly at present, the roles of the United States and European countries are not as interchangeable. As noted earlier, the United States and Europe relate to the countries of the Middle East in different ways and are seen by them in a different light. The United States is distrusted, hated, but also seen as the country that holds the key to a solution of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. European countries are seen as more sympathetic to the Arab view of the Palestinian issue, more willing to engage over the long run, but also as less influential. The United States is inclined to resounding rhetoric, fond of splashy initiatives, but also quick to change course. European countries are more willing to engage over the long run and to toil quietly out of the limelight, but also timid when it comes to pushing Arab governments to reform.

These differences, and the Arabs' contrasting perceptions of the United States and European countries, could turn into an asset if Western democracy promoters accept the idea of allowing the two sides to play to their own strengths. First, however, both sides would need to admit that the differences are real, that they are deep rooted and not just the result of a temporary spat over the war in Iraq, and that they do affect what different countries can and cannot do in terms of democracy promotion. Joint U.S.–EU initiatives in the Middle East do not play to strength of either side but are based on a least-common-denominator approach that, in view of the differences, tends to be feeble. The example of the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative launched by the G-8 in June 2004 at the insistence of the Bush administration is a good example of such a flawed approach. Reluctantly accepted by European countries after the United States agreed to dilute the initial concept, it is an unfunded initiative that will likely end up doing little to strengthen the separate efforts of the various formal partners to the agreement.

The strength of the United States is its power and its willingness to use the bully pulpit to castigate Arab regimes and denounce their weaknesses, to talk openly of reform, and, ultimately, to use force when necessary. Whether the United States is likely to use force in other Middle Eastern countries in the foreseeable future—in light of the difficulties encountered in Iraq and the strains on the U.S. military—is certainly open to question. Nevertheless, the perception still exists in the Arab world that it is only a matter of time before the United States overthrows another regime. "Who is next?" is a question asked in Arab countries with disturbing frequency.

This U.S. willingness to speak up and threaten, like it or not, has forced Arab countries to respond. Internal pressure, coupled with the realization by many regimes that the status quo cannot last indefinitely, has led to a flurry of reforms, ranging from the modest to the purely cosmetic, as Amy Hawthorne's chapter on the new reform ferment shows. This is certainly more in terms of political reform than European countries have been able to achieve in ten years through the Euro-Mediterranean initiative.

But there are downsides to this position of strength. First, when the United States implicitly or explicitly relies on the threat of military force to back up its calls for political reform, it becomes very hard or even impossible for Arab reformers to associate themselves in any way with

the U.S. agenda. The United States thus ends up losing the chance of close partnership with the people and organizations with which it might most likely be drawn to cooperate. Second, resounding rhetoric and high-profile initiatives cannot be sustained indefinitely. The United States needs to show quickly that pressure produces results. As a consequence, the United States has proven dispiritingly willing to accept timid or even just pro forma cosmetic reforms as genuine steps toward democratization. When Bahrain becomes a poster child of reform, and even Saudi Arabia gets high marks for talking about the possibility of some sort of local election in the indefinite future, it is difficult for Arab countries not to conclude that the United States will be satisfied with little.

Moreover, leaving aside threats of force, even the use of the bully pulpit for only peaceful calls for reform makes it difficult for the United States to truly engage in a dialogue with Arab countries and understand the complexities of the reform process. The bully pulpit lends itself to proclamations about good and evil, right and wrong, not to elaborating on the enormous complexity and the many gray areas of the political reform process. If you add to the mixture the discontinuities in U.S. policy resulting from the four-year election cycle and the partisan politicization of foreign policy, the United States has a hard time engaging consistently over the long term on these issues.

European countries can. They have done so for ten years, and undoubtedly they will continue to do so. The continuity of the European policy is ensured by the fact that engagement, particularly with its Mediterranean rim, is not a matter of choice but of necessity for Europe. The repercussions of the political and economic problems of the Middle East are felt directly by European countries—they are taking place in the immediate neighborhood. There is no military barrier that can make a difference under these conditions. But while European countries have been patiently engaging in unending economic dialogue and cultural exchanges, they have tiptoed cautiously around the crucial political issues. By forcing the issue of political reform into the public debate, the United States may have opened the door to a more effective European policy. It remains to be seen whether European countries will walk through that door.

We are not proposing here that Europe should play good cop to the American bad cop in a carefully orchestrated game where both cooperate to achieve the same results. Europe and the United States do not

need to agree on what they ultimately want in the region in order to play to their own strengths but also to take advantage of what the other side does. Europe and the United States are unlikely to truly agree on many crucial issues concerning the Middle East, from the solution of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict to the kind of regimes they would like to see emerge in the Arab world—democratic, to be sure, but what else? Yet the policies Europe and the United States pursue, even if pursued somewhat independently of each other, can have a complementary effect if each side plays to its strengths and recognizes the value of the other doing so.

Calibrating Expectations

No matter how carefully the United States and European countries take into account the special characteristics and conditions of the Arab world, the strengths on which each can draw, and the weaknesses that make it difficult for them to be effective in all areas, a final question remains: What is reasonable to expect from Western efforts to promote democracy in the Middle East?

The answers given to this question have been quite contradictory since policy makers have started focusing on Middle East reform after September 11. At one extreme have been the voices predicting that the war in Iraq would unleash a tsunami of democracy in the Middle East. Underlying this assumption, in addition to clear political motivations, is an image of the Arab world similar to Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, an edifice ready to collapse under its own weight, and needing only a shove to come tumbling down. This euphoric view of reform in the Middle East has been undermined by the difficulties of the war in Iraq and has been replaced widely by a more sober assessment that change will be slow—"a generational task" has become the expression of choice. In some quarters, the old skepticism that the Arab world is really not fit for democracy is resurfacing. Although this is not an idea likely to ever be expressed openly by the U.S. or European governments, it may be manifested in the form of tacit acceptance of friendly autocrats, particularly those that add a liberal veneer to cover the lack of democracy or make helpful gestures on the Palestinian–Israeli conflict.

The expectation that democracy could sweep through the Arab world quickly, even if Iraq turns out well in the end and Western governments

fully take up the challenge of promoting democracy in the region, is not supported by anything we know about democratic transitions and the impact of democracy assistance. Even in the former socialist world, where indeed many regimes collapsed suddenly and dramatically, the building of democracy has been a slow, uneven process, with no assurance of success. The troubling political situation in most parts of the former Soviet Union highlights this fact. At the other extreme, the contention that the Arab world is culturally incapable of becoming democratic is belied by the intensity of the discussions about democracy that are taking place in the region, even inside Islamist movements. Debate does not amount to change, but the idea that democracy is too far outside the reaches of Arab culture and society to ever take hold is certainly contradicted by this debate.

It appears therefore that Western officials, aid practitioners, and others committed to supporting democratic change in the Middle East should be prepared for a long, uncertain journey. It is certainly possible that democratic change will spread in the region over the next ten or twenty years. At the same time, however, there is no guarantee that it will happen. Democracy promotion is never easy, but it is especially hard in the Middle East due to a knotty combination of factors, including the deeply entrenched nature of the nondemocratic regimes of the region, the legacy of Western support for these regimes and the continued conflicting mix of Western interests, and a host of special issues such as the existence of political Islam, the difficulties of Arab–Israeli relations, and the presence of a significant share of the world's oil. In this daunting context, outside actors will in most instances not be the primary determinants of change. But they can make positive contributions. And they will do so above all if they translate their newly discovered policy imperative, the urgency of which tempts dramatic and hurried actions, into a sophisticated blend of sustained and subtle measures that reflect the realities of the problems and challenges on the ground rather than the fears and hopes that drive the West to engage.