

WORKING
P A P E R S

**Middle East
Series**

**PROMOTING
DEMOCRACY
IN THE
MIDDLE EAST**

**The Problem
of U.S. Credibility**

Marina Ottaway



CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT
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**Democracy and Rule
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FOREWORD

After decades of giving relatively little attention to the possibility and problems of democracy in the Middle East, the U.S. foreign policy community has in the past year elevated the issue to a position of central importance. Debates over how democratic change might occur in the Arab world and how the United States can promote such change have multiplied rapidly. Though there is a close relationship between this newfound interest and the broader U.S. war on terrorism, the subject is taking on a life of its own and will likely figure as a critical part of U.S. foreign policy in the decade ahead no matter what the course and duration of the anti-terrorism campaign.

In response to this surge of interest, the Democracy and Rule of Law Project at the Carnegie Endowment has undertaken a series of interrelated activities to help policy makers, aid practitioners, policy analysts, journalists, and the public better understand the challenges of promoting democracy in the Middle East and identify ways of moving forward. With this new working paper, we introduce an additional component to this activity—a series of working papers that will frame key issues relating to democracy promotion policies and programs in the Middle East.

This first paper, *Promoting Democracy in the Middle East: The Problem of U.S. Credibility*, highlights a problem of fundamental importance—the lack of credibility that the United States has in the Arab world when it presents itself as a pro-democratic actor. Although many Americans may feel that America's bona fides as a pro-democratic actor are unquestionable, the stubborn fact remains that many people in other parts of the world, especially the Middle East, have a different opinion. If left unaddressed, this credibility gap will undermine even the most well-intentioned efforts by the United States to promote positive political change in the region. While recognizing that there are no instant solutions to this problem, the paper identifies ways the United States can begin to alleviate the gap and in so doing pave the way for a genuine, lasting democratic engagement with the Middle East.

THOMAS CAROTHERS
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SINCE EARLY LAST YEAR, THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION has paid unaccustomed attention to the issue of democracy in the Middle East. Following September 11, many U.S. officials have worried that the authoritarianism of most Arab regimes has bred frustration in their countries, and this frustration has in turn favored the growth of terrorist organizations. U.S. discussions about the need for democracy in the Middle East have triggered a strong negative reaction by Arab commentators and journalists, including in discussions of democracy in the Arab press. However, very little of this writing has dealt with the problem of democracy in the real sense—that is, with the issue of how Arab governments relate to their citizens now and how they should relate to their citizens in the future. Instead, Arab commentators have treated democracy as a foreign policy issue, asking why the United States is suddenly discussing democracy in the Arab world and what true intentions it is trying to hide behind the smoke screen of democracy talk. The debate in the Arab press reveals some of the obstacles that the United States faces as it attempts to define its new pro-democracy role in the Middle East.

The Arab press consistently questions U.S. intentions. Arab commentators lambasted the Bush administration for using the idea of democracy promotion as a code word for regime change—an interpretation based on Washington’s tough talk directed against Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and Palestinian Authority President Yassir Arafat. They also reacted negatively when in early December Secretary of State Colin Powell announced a conciliatory Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) that envisages democratization as a slow, gradual process that the United States would encourage by promoting economic development, education, rights for women, and the funding of civil society organizations.

The Arab reaction to the Bush administration’s new emphasis on Middle East democracy indicates that the United States faces a fundamental problem of credibility as a promoter of democracy in the region. Deep suspicions of U.S. motives will not be easily allayed. Yet, for the United States to completely pull back from promoting democracy or, more broadly, political transitions in the Middle East would be a mistake. Most Arab countries have deeply troubled, even dysfunctional political systems.¹ All face serious challenges from Islamist movements. The democratic opposition tends to be quite weak, reducing the politics of many countries to a confrontation between non-democratic regimes and an equally non-democratic, often Islamist, opposition. This is not a situation that augurs well for stability in the region, nor for progress toward more democracy and the respect of human rights. While there is no direct correlation between lack of democracy and terrorism, particularly terrorism directed against foreign targets, the domestic political situation in many Middle East countries is a cause for concern.

Undoubtedly segments of the Arab public want their governments to become more open. Even some of the Arab analysts lambasting the Bush administration’s newfound desire to promote

¹ See Dan Brumberg, “Democratization in the Arab World? The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy,” *Journal of Democracy* (October 2002), pp. 56–68.

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democracy in the Middle East have admitted that their countries must become more democratic. However, they have done so in terms so vague as to suggest that their words are not likely to be followed by action—which is confirmed by the scarcity of pro-democracy agitation in the Arab world and by the fact that the little political reform that has taken place has been initiated from the top. External pressure thus remains important to keeping a pro-democracy agenda alive. However, the United States is unlikely to be able to exert such pressure successfully unless it builds its credibility as a pro-democracy actor. The recent diatribes in the Arab press indicate clearly why the United States has so little credibility in Arab eyes and highlight the main issues it needs to address to become a credible partner in democracy promotion.

READING THE ARAB PRESS

In considering the reaction of the Arab press to the Middle East policy of the Bush administration, it is important to keep in mind that the writers have been reacting to their perceptions of what that policy is, not necessarily to the reality of the policy. For example, the writers saw Powell's December 2002 speech as an indication of a change in U.S. policy on democracy, rather than as a moderate alternative to a policy of regime change. They reacted accordingly. It is not surprising that Arab commentators at times misperceived U.S. policy. It has been quite difficult, even in Washington, to be sure what the policy is, given the conflicting points of view within the administration as well as the usual tension between political rhetoric and reality. I will not try in this paper to clarify what administration policy is and how it has evolved over time. Instead, I will try to interpret what the Arab commentators believe the policy to be and how they have reacted to it. That their interpretation has not always been accurate is itself an indicator of distrust: They interpreted all policy statements in a way that would cast suspicion on the United States.

Another question that needs to be clarified at the outset is what importance can be attached to the articles in the Arab press.² Do such articles represent anything more than the views of some discontented intellectuals? Do they reflect the policy of their governments? Do such articles have an impact on public opinion? Answering such questions for countries with repressive regimes is never easy, but there is enough information from disparate sources to conclude that this outpouring of articles hostile to the United States and to the Bush administration's talk of democracy promotion in the Middle East should not be dismissed as unrepresentative or inconsequential. Studies, including public opinion surveys, indicate that distrust of the United States and suspicion about its motives are widespread in Arab countries.³ There is no indication, for example, that the prospect of an American-led democratic transformation of the region is eroding support for Islamist parties—they have done

² This discussion is based predominantly on extensive reading of the articles in two influential dailies (the Cairo-based *Al-Abram* and the London-based *Al-Hayat*), on summaries of articles from the rest of the Arab world by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, and on the reviews of the Arab press in the Foreign Media Reaction reports prepared by the U.S. State Department's International Information Program.

³ See Bruce Stokes and Mary McIntosh, "How They See Us," *National Journal*, December 21, 2002, pp. 3720–6; "Talking with the Islamic World: Is the Message Getting Through?" transcripts of a three part-program at the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., February, March, and April 2002; available at http://cfdev.georgetown.edu/sfs/programs/isd/research_islamic.cfm. See in particular the transcript of the first session, "The U.S. Image in the Islamic World," February 19, 2002; and Daniel Brumberg, "Arab Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy: A Complex Encounter," testimony prepared for the Subcommittee on Government Reform of the Committee on Government Reform, U.S. House of Representatives, October 8, 2002.

very well at the polls in countries that held elections in the last year. Nor is there any indication that the Bush administration's new line has caused an upsurge in the popularity of democratic parties. Moreover, opinion polls have shown an increase in anti-American attitudes. The views expressed in the newspapers thus do not appear to be at odds with those of the public. Nor are they at odds with those of their governments, which have allowed the constant and at times rather savage criticism of U.S. policy to continue for months—the press is controlled to some extent in all Middle Eastern countries, and writers could not take a position that the government does not approve of on a regular, sustained basis.

It is also important to consider what this barrage of articles indicates about the attitudes of the intellectual elite to which these writers belong, an elite whose involvement will be crucial to any process of democratization. These writers are well educated, often in the West. They have all had some exposure to the West. Many have lived in the United States, were happy there, and like going back on visits. They are, in other words, the people who could be expected to have the greatest interest in and aspirations for democracy. Yet their suspicion of the United States leads them to concentrate on what they perceive to be the hypocrisy and contradictions of U.S. policy, rather than on the problems of their own political systems. In turn, these journalists and analysts are read by, and thus influence to an extent, the better educated segment of the population, the professionals and businessmen who also must embrace the cause of democracy if the change is to take place.

AFTER SEPTEMBER 11: A RHETORICAL ONSLAUGHT

U.S. policy in the Middle East has traditionally favored the stability of friendly regimes, no matter how autocratic, over the promotion of democratic change. This acceptance of friendly autocrats was based in part on security considerations, in part on dependence on Arab oil, and in part, finally, on the fact that the United States had little leverage to force reforms on regimes whose cooperation it needed to maintain peace in the region and to secure access to abundant and cheap oil. As a result, the democracy aid directed to the region—about \$250 million during the 1990s—financed cautious projects, carefully designed to avoid angering or destabilizing incumbent regimes.

It was thus a shock to Arabs when the Bush administration in the months following September 11 suddenly identified the absence of democracy in the Middle East as a serious problem that threatened not only the citizens of Arab countries but U.S. security as well. In many statements about the causes of terrorism, administration officials linked it to the frustrations engendered among Arabs by the absence of democracy in their countries. This interpretation of the causes of terrorism was taken as axiomatic, even though known Middle East terrorists were directing their efforts against the United States rather than their own governments, as could be expected from people angered by the absence of democracy at home.⁴

The Bush administration's new emphasis on the lack of democracy as a cause of terrorism, its criticism of Saudi Arabia and Egypt (the two countries from which most of the September 11 hijackers originated), and its growing insistence on the necessity of regime change in Iraq and Palestine convinced many Arabs that the United States was rejecting the long-standing view that

⁴ See Thomas Carothers, "Promoting Democracy and Fighting Terror," *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2003), pp. 84–97.

its interests in the Middle East were best protected by the stability of friendly regimes, and that it intended to promote regime changes throughout the area.

The issue of what officials in the Bush administration actually have said, what they have hinted at, what was stated by neoconservatives close to the administration but not officially part of it, and what Arabs have heard is very confused. To the best of this writer's knowledge, administration officials have never explicitly equated democracy promotion with regime change except in the case of Iraq and the Palestinian Authority. In those two cases, the position of the administration has been clear: The first step toward democracy in Iraq is to remove Saddam Hussein from power, just as the first step toward genuine reform in the Palestinian territory is to ensure that Yassir Arafat will not run for office—and win—again. However, President George W. Bush and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice have also stated on more than one occasion that change in Iraq will lead to a far-reaching transformation of the entire region. In an interview with the *Financial Times* that provoked widespread, angry responses in the Arab press, Rice declared that the United States was committed not only to the removal of Saddam Hussein but also to “the democratization or the march of freedom in the Muslim world.”⁵ The Arab press response was prompt and vicious. “She is ignoring,” the Jordanian daily *Al-Dustour* replied, “more than one and a half billion Muslims who suffer from American greed and oppression and from its cruel and visible war against Islam and Muslims,” while the London-based *Al-Hayat* lashed out against “Ayatollah Condoleezza and the Export of Democracy.”⁶

The comments of neoconservatives close to the administration have been even more sanguine. “We should . . . be talking about using all our political, moral and military genius to support a vast democratic revolution to liberate all the people of the Middle East from tyranny,” wrote Michael Ledeen, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.⁷ Adding up the administration's explicit statements about regime change in Iraq and Palestine, its view of democracy's march in other countries, and the statements of the neoconservatives, Arab analysts concluded that the United States intends to launch a major program to replace the Arab regimes it does not like and to dictate to people in the region how they should choose their governments and whom they should choose to lead them.

Reacting to this interpretation of the Bush administration's policy, Arab commentators have for months launched a series of diatribes against the United States and its views on Middle East democracy. Despite the incredibly large number of articles—it seems every self-respecting analyst had to contribute his or her comments on this issue—only three basic arguments have been used: first, the U.S. call for democracy is a smoke screen to distract international public opinion from the real, hidden U.S. agendas in the region; second, the United States has no credibility when it talks about democracy promotion, because of its past record in the region and even domestically; and third, the United States has no right to interfere in the internal affairs of Arab countries—I will not elaborate on this last argument as it is common to discussions of democracy promotion in any region. None of the writers entertained the possibility that the Bush administration might actually be committed to democracy for its own sake. Most of them did not even seriously consider that the United States might be interested in democracy for instrumental reasons, namely to prevent terrorism, as officials of the Bush administration kept on repeating. Instead, they all looked for

⁵ Interview with Condoleezza Rice by James Harding and Richard Wolffe, *Financial Times*, September 23, 2002.

⁶ Quoted in “Reform in the Arab and Muslim World: Arab Press Reacts to National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice's Statements on Democracy and Freedom,” Special Dispatch Series no. 427, October 11 (Washington, D.C.: The Middle East Media Research Institute, 2002), available at: <http://www.memri.org/reform.html>.

⁷ *Wall Street Journal*, September 4, 2002.

hidden agendas. “One only has to look at what is NOT mentioned to realize what all this must be about,” wrote a particularly conspiracy-minded columnist.⁸ Commentators also refused to entertain the possibility that Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction might constitute a real threat not only to the United States but also to Iraq’s neighbors. A Jordanian writer, for example, noted that “It is natural for the United States and Britain to view Baghdad’s acceptance of the return of inspectors as a tactical maneuver because their real goal goes beyond the return of inspectors. They know very well that Iraq is not capable of producing weapons of mass destruction.”⁹ And a former Jordanian senator wrote that “Bush and his Israeli chorus know that there is not an atom of truth in their allegations and statements, for Iraq’s weapons have been destroyed and [the country] is still under a land, sea, and air blockade.”¹⁰

The hidden agenda most commonly identified by Arab writers is the United States’s decision to allow Israel to control the region and to give Prime Minister Ariel Sharon *carte blanche* in dealing with the Palestinian territories and the *intifada*. “The first objective is to serve Israel and implement its Sharonist wish of striking off the map a pivotal Arab country, thus giving Israel full dominance over the Arab region for an indefinite period of time. . . . Hence the first thing that the alternative Iraqi government will do, either voluntarily or under coercion, is to recognize Israel and unconditionally exchange diplomatic representation with it. The rest of the Arab countries would fall like domino chips.”¹¹

Another supposed driver of U.S. policy is a determination to take control of Iraqi oil fields. “The claims of the American media, endlessly reiterated—concerning Iraq’s alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction that pose threats to US interests, the need to replace the present dictatorship with a truly democratic order—are no more than colorful confetti, thrown with the intention of diverting attention away from Washington’s real objective, which is no more, and no less, than to secure access to Iraqi oil, and to ensure that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries no longer produce organizations like Bin Laden’s Al-Qaeda.”¹²

Other commentators have seen democracy promotion as a means to extend American hegemony by lowering resistance to U.S. policies: “Within this framework, the only logical explanation for the so-called US program for bolstering democracy in the Middle East is that it is merely a means of pressuring Arab and Islamic governments and regimes to become more cooperative with US policies on Palestine, Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan and other areas where Washington is committing gross mistakes that worry everybody.”¹³

The many contentions that the United States lacks credibility as a promoter of democracy in the Middle East revolve around two major themes, with a third issue being raised more rarely, but then with vicious undertones. First, and very central, is the contention that the U.S. officials have no credibility when they call for respect for democracy and human rights because of their callous

⁸ Haim Bresheeth, “Countdown to chaos: Arguments full of holes can hardly hide the truth, which is about oil, elections, and finding a scapegoat,” *Al-Abram* (Cairo, Egypt), no. 603, September 12–18, 2002.

⁹ Tariq Masarwah, “Yes, It Is a Tactical Maneuver,” *Amman Al-Ra’y* (Amman, Jordan), September 18, 2002, FBIS Transcribed Text.

¹⁰ Husni Ayish, “The Post-Modern Hitler,” *Amman Al-Ra’y* (Amman, Jordan), October 1, 2002, FBIS Transcribed Text.

¹¹ Ayish, “The Post-Modern Hitler.”

¹² Salama A Salama, “Oil and War,” *Al-Abram* (Cairo, Egypt), no. 599, August 15–20, 2002.

¹³ Husayn Abd-al-Wahid, “Democracy and US Interests!” *Akhbar al-Yawm* (Cairo, Egypt), August 31, 2002, FBIS Transcribed Text.

disregard for the rights of Palestinians. “The United States cannot claim today to be the champion of freedoms while it is waging ‘vicious’ wars against the Arabs in most of their countries, from Egypt to Saudi Arabia, and from Iraq to Yemen. . . . This superpower, which protects and sponsors Sharon’s mass killings and systematic destruction of Palestinian life, cannot emerge as an ‘angel’ in Lebanon, calling for virtuous work and looking after the seeds of democracy!” argued a Lebanese writer.¹⁴ And a Jordanian commentator asked rhetorically: “And what does Bush have to say about the so-called Israeli democracy, which has produced the worst kind of far-right, extremist government, led by General Ariel Sharon, who is committed to continued occupation, the demolition of more Palestinian houses, the expropriation of Palestinian land, the assassination of Palestinian activists, ethnic cleansing and all-out state terrorism?”¹⁵

The second factor Arab commentators cite as undermining U.S. credibility is the long-standing U.S. support for autocratic Arab regimes that are willing to accept U.S. policies in the area, maintain the status quo, and supply the United States with abundant and cheap oil. “The US is not the country that people of this region can rely upon to generate a foreign climate conducive to fostering and supporting a true process of democratization. The US has a long record of supporting dictatorships and of plotting to overthrow democratically elected governments. Whenever the defense of democratic values has come into conflict with the defense of US interests, the latter always win out.”¹⁶ Others are more sarcastic: “Now we are being told that Saddam is not a democrat, is not nice at all really, is actually a tyrant who gasses his own people. How nice to hear this two decades after the event in Khalabje, from the very governments who supported him in his first Gulf War against Iran. It did not seem to bother them then, or at any time in the past two decades.”¹⁷

At times, commentators have also attacked U.S. credibility in a third way, by turning their attention to the U.S. global human rights record and even its domestic policies. For example, commentators reacted to U.S. condemnation of the imprisonment of Egyptian political activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim by noting, “We wished the U.S. would have focused its attention rather on Palestine, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan and many areas in Latin America where real human rights violations are rife, instead of digging for allegations about Egypt’s breaching of human rights.”¹⁸ Occasional articles, sparked by remarks made by Condoleezza Rice, argued that a country treating its African American citizens as the United States does should not preach democracy to others. “As for you, black Condoleezza Rice,” wrote the Jordanian daily *Al-Dustour* in an article with strong racist overtones, “swallow your tongue, remember your origins and stop talking about liberation and freedom. Have you not been taught by your cowboy masters that ‘slaves’ cannot liberate themselves, that they are not capable to capture the large Islamic world whose cultural roots are planted in the depths of history?”¹⁹

¹⁴ Talal Salman, “The American ‘Advice’ Turns the Closure into Assassination,” *Al-Safir* (Beirut, Lebanon), September 9, 2002, FBIS Transcribed Text.

¹⁵ Fahd Fanek, “Who wants democracy in the Arab world,” *Jordan Times* (Amman, Jordan), September 30, 2002, FBIS Transcribed Text.

¹⁶ Hassan Nafaa, “Democratic reductionism: Hassan Nafaa questions the sincerity of Washington’s newly espoused belief that democracy is the way forward in the Arab world,” *Al-Abram* (Cairo, Egypt), no. 597, August 1–7, 2002.

¹⁷ Bresheeth, “Countdown to chaos.”

¹⁸ *MENA* (Cairo, Egypt), August 15, 2002, FBIS Transcribed Text.

¹⁹ Quoted in “Reform in the Arab and Muslim World.”

THE MIDDLE EAST PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVE AND A NEW WAVE OF CRITICISM

Because of its own internal divisions, the Bush administration has proceeded on different tracks while pursuing the issue of democracy in the Middle East. While some officials made belligerent statements giving the impression the United States would no longer cooperate with autocratic regimes, others, particularly in the State Department, worked quietly to develop a more conciliatory approach. Their efforts centered on mounting a public diplomacy campaign to influence Arab views of the United States and on forging a new set of aid projects, what has become the Middle East Partnership Initiative.

The public diplomacy campaign was unveiled in late 2002, during the month of Ramadan. Its central component was a series of mini-TV documentaries entitled “Shared Values,” produced at a cost of \$15 million. The programs aimed to show that Arabs and, more generally, Muslims in the United States were free to live according to their values and pursue their religion but at the same time were accepted and well integrated into mainstream society. The series aired from October 28 to December 10 on pan-Arab television stations and in Indonesia, Kuwait, Malaysia, and Pakistan.²⁰ These documentaries were greeted with scorn by Arab commentators: “Once more, the Americans are tangled up in an absurd strategy. Their TV campaign to ameliorate their image does not help much, since the essential is absent,” wrote the Tunisian paper *Le Quotidien* in a derisive article.²¹

The MEPI was officially announced, after much hesitation and several postponements, by Secretary of State Colin Powell in December.²² Funded at \$29 million for the entire region for 2003, with \$7–8 million earmarked for women’s rights and civil society support and the rest going to education and development programs, MEPI was an extension of the cautious democracy promotion policy of the 1990s. The idea behind MEPI was most clearly outlined by Richard Haass, the head of the Policy Planning Bureau at the State Department, shortly before Powell’s official announcement. “Democracy,” he declared on December 4, “takes time . . . Democracy rests on an informed and educated populace . . . women are vital to democracy . . . while it can be encouraged from outside, democracy is best built from within.”²³

There is nothing in MEPI to frighten incumbent regimes and make them fear that the Bush administration is out to overthrow them. The United States was not planning “to abandon longtime allies such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia because of their lack of democracy” but would offer “positive reinforcement for emerging reform trends,” explained an administration official.²⁴ But if the goal of MEPI was to appease the anger against the United States that existed at all levels in the Arab

²⁰ For details, see Richard Boucher, State Department Spokesman, “Public Diplomacy: Reaching Out to Islamic Countries (Excerpt from October 30 Press Briefing)” (Washington, D.C.: U.S. State Department, October 30, 2002), available at: <http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/14835.htm>. See also the public diplomacy web site being maintained by the State Department and Council of American Muslims for Understanding at: <http://www.opendialogue.com>.

²¹ Quoted in Department of State, International Information Program, Foreign Media Reaction, “U.S. Image in the Islamic World: ‘Policy’ Is the Problem,” November 26, 2002.

²² Colin Powell, “The U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative: Building Hope for the Years Ahead,” speech delivered at The Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., December 12, 2002; available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2002/15920.htm>.

²³ Richard N. Haass, “Toward Greater Democracy in the Muslim World,” speech delivered to the Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, D.C., December 4, 2002; available at <http://www.state.gov/s/p/rem/15686.htm>.

²⁴ Cited in Barbara Slavin, “Arab Lawmakers Get Close-up View of Democracy,” *USA Today*, December 12, 2002.

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world, it failed. The same Arab press that had been inveighing against what it had interpreted as an aggressively pro-democracy stance by the Bush administration was equally vehement in its criticism of MEPI. In a pithy summing up of the Arab press reaction to the initiative, the State Department's International Information Program wrote: "Arab media panned MEPI as a misguided effort to improve the US's image in the Arab world and gain legitimacy for a war against Iraq" and "critics dismissed MEPI as 'peanuts' compared to US military expenditures in the region."²⁵

For most commentators, MEPI simply added insult to injury. First, the United States had threatened to intervene in the domestic affairs of Arab countries and change their regimes, then it tried to smooth ruffled feathers by offering a sop. "The US has set aside no more than 30 million dollars to support freedom and support democracy in the Arab region. . . . This sum is not only too little; it also reflects the extent to which the ruling elite in Washington despises the Arabs, and the degree to which it has no serious intention of resisting dictatorships in the region," commented *Al-Quds al-Arabi*.²⁶ A writer in Qatar added wryly: "Allocating \$29 million is not even enough to launch an advertising campaign in the United States for a local domestic product."²⁷

Compared to the tens of billions the United States would spend on a war in Iraq, the sum devoted to democracy, development, and education was seen by Arab commentators as another sign that the United States only pretended to care about the transformation of the Arab world and that its real priorities lay elsewhere: "The United States has allocated \$29 million for [MEPI], while the supposed war against Iraq will be costing it \$100 billion dollars. . . . This is what falls within the frame of subduing the Arab world and controlling its capabilities to force it into accepting a new Middle East order."²⁸

Other themes raised in the reaction to MEPI are familiar ones from the earlier critiques of the regime change approach. For example, some Arab commentators accused the United States of hypocrisy for claiming that it would help cure the democratic deficit when in reality it continued to support autocratic regimes. Many of these articles had a self-congratulatory "I told you so" tone, with the writers pointing out that they had been right all along in predicting that the United States would continue to support autocratic leaders. A second familiar theme concerns Palestine. An Egyptian columnist exemplified both ideas when he noted that "We regard the American initiative with suspicion. . . . What is the U.S. benefit from establishment of democratic regimes in Arab and Islamic states? Has it not been the prime mover of dictatorships in the Middle East since [the] mid-1920s? . . . The United States should first achieve justice in Palestine and then we might believe its democratic intentions."²⁹ A Qatar University journalism professor presented another take on American hypocrisy: "[The United States] allocates \$29 million to defend democracy and freedom,

²⁵ Department of State, International Information Program, Foreign Media Reaction, "Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI): Arab Press Wary," December 20, 2002.

²⁶ Quoted in *Mideast Mirror*, November 18, 2002.

²⁷ Abdul Kareem Hashish, *Al-Raya* (Qatar), quoted in U.S. Department of State, "Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI): Arab Press Wary."

²⁸ Awni Kaaki, *As-Sharq* (Lebanon), quoted in U.S. Department of State, "Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI): Arab Press Wary."

²⁹ Gamal Badawi, *Al-Wafd* (Egypt), quoted in U.S. Department of State, "Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI): Arab Press Wary."

while it opens Guantanamo camps and allows killing and torture in Palestine.”³⁰ And the pan-Arab paper *Al-Khaleej* observed, “Suddenly, the U.S. wants ‘good’ for Arabs. Who will believe that after the long U.S. history of suppressing them, supporting their enemies, violating their rights, and encouraging everything negative in this region for decades? How will people believe in what Powell says, when Washington works to strengthen the Israeli suppression in Palestine . . . ?”³¹

WEAK VOICES ON DEMOCRACY

Although Arab writers have had little good to say about the U.S. intention—or pretense, as they saw it—to promote democracy in the Middle East, at least a few writers have been willing to go beyond the anti-American diatribe. “Is it enough to reject their democracy?” Salah Eddin Hafez asked in *Al-Ahram*.³² His answer, echoed by other articles, was that the problem of democracy in the Middle East was pressing, and that it was up to Arabs themselves to address it if they did not want others to do so for them. Or, as Uraib Al-Rantawi noted in Jordan’s *Al-Dustour*, “The need for political, economic, administrative, and fiscal reform in the Arab world is real, even if it is the Americans that tell us about it.”³³

Only a small number of writers were willing to raise this fundamental point in the initial phase of the debate, when analysts thought the United States equated democracy with regime change. Their number increased somewhat in response to the launching of MEPI. Powell and Haass had issued a direct challenge by asserting that democracy would ultimately have to come from the inside, with the United States partnering in the effort but not leading the process. Haass was especially explicit: “Democratization is a process that is fundamentally driven by members of a society, by its citizens. . . . If the United States or anyone else tries to impose the trappings of democracy on a country, the result will be neither democratic nor durable. The only way democracy can take root is if it is homegrown.”³⁴

The Arab press, however, did not begin a discussion of how a democratic transformation could start, how it would unfold, who would lead it. To some extent, this can be attributed to the limited freedom enjoyed by Arab writers—they could criticize the United States with impunity, since their governments were also leery of the Bush administration’s intentions, but they could not easily discuss how to bring about change without challenging those governments. But the problem appeared to go further. Many of the writers appeared to be caught between a nationalism that pushed them to reject foreign pressure and the knowledge that, without pressure, those governments were not likely to change. Public opinion, one writer stated, was caught between “the fire of the governing regime and the fire of the hated American pressure.”³⁵

³⁰ Ahmed Al Qadidi, *Al-Bayan* (Dubai, United Arab Emirates), quoted in U.S. Department of State, “Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI): Arab Press Wary.”

³¹ *Al-Khaleej* (Sharjah, United Arab Emirates), quoted in U.S. Department of State, “Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI): Arab Press Wary.”

³² *Al-Ahram*, December 4, 2002.

³³ Uraib Al-Rantawi, *Al-Dustour* (Jordan), quoted in U.S. Department of State, “Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI): Arab Press Wary.”

³⁴ Haass, “Toward Greater Democracy in the Muslim World.”

³⁵ *Al-Ahram*, December 4, 2002.

PROMOTING DEMOCRACY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

That at least some articles articulate the understanding that democratization is a necessity in the Arab world suggests that there is a desire for democracy by at least a part of the Arab public, but there is not a strong drive to fight for it. This impression is supported by the results of some recent studies of Arab public opinion that seek to test the values commonly upheld by the population of Arab countries. Such studies conclude that such values are not very different from American values, even in the political realm.³⁶

And yet, Arab countries are not changing much politically. Even those often hailed as examples of successful reform, such as Morocco and Bahrain, are in reality modernized autocracies with a liberalized façade, and there is reason to doubt that they can simply evolve toward democracy without a sharp break with the present political structures.³⁷ The dominant political characteristic of the Middle East remains stagnation. The idea of a purely internal process of change, unsupported by external pressure, is not realistic. Democracy is not the inevitable outcome in the Arab world for the foreseeable future. There is need for sustained external pressure and encouragement. However, to be successful, pressure must come from credible sources. At present, the United States lacks credibility in the Arab world.

BUILDING CREDIBILITY

Lack of credibility will not prevent the United States from trying to implement projects to encourage democratic change in the Arab world. In fact, the Middle East Partnership Initiative generated its first project even before Powell's announcement. In November 2002, the State Department invited a group of Arab women who had run or planned to run for office to observe the election process here and to get advice from American experts on how to run a campaign more effectively. Projects of this kind can be carried out even in the absence of trust. There will always be visitors willing to come to the United States, or students interested in studying in American universities. But these are not programs that can make a significant difference in countries that are already open to the world. Tens of thousands of Arab students have graduated from American universities over the years; hundreds of thousands have visited. A few hundred more visitors will not make much difference.

To play a more important role in the political transformation of the Middle East, the United States needs to establish its credibility as a pro-democracy actor. This will be difficult, but it is not impossible. It has been faced and solved elsewhere. For example, the United States had very low credibility in Latin America when it first started talking of democracy promotion in the 1980s, because in that region, too, it had historically chosen the stability of friendly autocratic regimes over the unpredictable outcome of political transitions. Sustained U.S. support for democratic change in the second half of the 1980s and throughout the 1990s slowly allayed suspicions about American intentions. The same is happening in many African countries, because U.S. support for democratic change has become more consistent during the last decade.

³⁶ See Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, "Islam and the West: Testing the 'Clash of Civilizations' Thesis," Harvard University, Kennedy School of Government Working Paper, May 6, 2002; James J. Zogby, *What Arabs Think: Values, Beliefs and Concerns* (Washington, D.C.: Zogby International/The Arab Thought Foundation, 2002); and Stokes and McIntosh, "How They See Us," pp. 3720–6.

³⁷ Brumberg, "Democratization in the Arab World?" pp. 56–68; and see Marina Ottaway, "Egypt: Institutionalized Semi-Authoritarianism," in *Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003), ch. 1, pp. 31–50.

One lesson of democracy promotion efforts in other regions is that restoring credibility is a slow process that requires consistent policies and sustained efforts to promote political transitions. The reaction of the Arab press and the Arab public suggests that in the Middle East, the United States also faces a set of obstacles specific to the region.

First and foremost, it is clear that the United States cannot hope to be taken seriously when it talks of its commitment to democracy in the Arab world unless it renews its efforts to revive negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, puts pressure on Israel to allow Palestinian elections to take place, and is prepared to deal with Yassir Arafat if he is reelected. The consistent way in which these issues were mentioned in the vast majority of the articles leaves no doubt about this.

A second crucial issue that emerges clearly from these articles concerns the exploitation of Iraqi oil after an invasion. If the United States is perceived to be exploiting Iraqi oil for its own interest—be it to pay for the war or for the presence of an occupying force—or if it uses post-invasion control over the oil fields to dictate levels of production and to ensure that oil contracts go exclusively to U.S. companies, this will confirm the worst Arab suspicions that the talk of democracy and regime change was simply an oil grab.

A third issue affecting the credibility of U.S. commitment to democracy is how consistently the United States will deal with autocratic regimes in the future. The temptation is going to be strong to continue taking a tough position against regimes that contribute nothing to the security and well-being of the United States—Syria, for example—while tiptoeing around the shortcomings of oil-rich countries, particularly Saudi Arabia. And it is going to be very difficult for the United States to find a level of pressure that can be sustained across the region. Lack of consistency, however, will only reinforce cynicism about the United States's true aims in the region.

A fourth issue, particularly important in establishing credibility with democrats in the region, is the way in which the United States reacts to the cautious, top-down political reforms that are being implemented by some Arab monarchies. Excessive praise of such changes—such as Secretary Powell's statement in his December 12 speech that “countries such as Bahrain, Qatar and Morocco have embarked on bold political reforms”—raises the question of whether the United States is committed to democracy or will settle for face-saving steps by autocratic regimes whose core power remains unchallenged.³⁸ However, denunciation of these changes as largely cosmetic will open the United States to accusations that it is trying to impose its democracy, rather than letting Arabs develop their own.

Finally, the United States will fail to gain credibility unless it invests much more money in the Middle East Partnership Initiative or similar projects. The disproportion between the ambitious vision outlined by Powell and Haass and the sum devoted to the task was greeted with anger and disdain—and with some reason. The commitment of large amounts of money does not guarantee success, but the commitment of \$29 million across fifteen countries does guarantee that the impact will be negligible.

The Bush administration may well consider that it is not in the United States's interest to address the issues outlined above. It should harbor no illusion, however, that it can avoid taking those steps and still become a credible promoter of Middle Eastern democracy.

³⁸ Powell, “The U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative.”

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