

US democracy promotion in the Arab Middle East since 11 September 2001: a critique

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US foreign policy has always contained a powerful idealist element, and promoting democracy abroad has been one of its goals, in one way or another, since the time of Woodrow Wilson. Democracy promotion gained particular salience in the Cold War context under Ronald Reagan. It was then re-emphasized in the euphoria of the post-Cold War period under Bill Clinton. But after 11 September 2001 the US administration focused on promoting democracy in the Middle East especially, and with unprecedented forcefulness. There were both ideological and practical reasons for this. Democracy is a key principle in the neo-conservative world-view which has come to dominate the Bush administrations of 2000 and 2005; and the policy consensus in the Bush administrations has been that fostering democracy in the Middle East would drain the pool from which terrorist organizations draw recruits in their 'global struggle' against the US. It would also contribute to the peaceful resolution of disputes in the region because 'democracies do not go to war with one another'.¹

This article tracks the emergence and implementation of US democracy promotion policies since 2001 and assesses their impact on the Arab 'core' of the Middle East region.² It shows that the impact of US democracy promotion policies has been ambiguous and suggests three reasons why this is so. It then uses this analysis to make suggestions for improving US policy.

The promotion of democracy in the Arab Middle East by the US since 2001 has been pursued on a number of different levels, none of which can be understood in isolation from the others. The first level consists of policy initiatives comprising clusters of projects to support civil society organizations and reform state institutions with a view to encouraging democratic change. USAID has increased emphasis on democracy promotion since 2001, as a means of reducing

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¹ The reference here is to the 'democratic peace thesis'.

² I have excluded Turkey and Iran from this study because they present altogether different problems for US foreign policy from those posed by the Arab world. The 'core Arab area' refers to the countries of the Arab League.

poverty and enhancing US security.³ But the main US step in this direction was the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), announced in December 2002 by US Secretary of State Colin Powell. MEPI's 'strategy' has been shaped, in part, by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) *Arab Human Development Report* of 2002, which identified three key deficits, in political freedom, women's empowerment and knowledge.⁴ The initiative rested on four pillars (economic, political, educational and women's rights) and recommended a variety of country-specific and region-wide projects.⁵ A second democracy promotion initiative was the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) Partnership Initiative, announced in June 2004 at the G8 summit in Atlanta, Georgia.⁶ Although not exclusively an American project—its purpose was to make democracy promotion a cooperative enterprise between G8 and Middle Eastern governments—it was very much spearheaded by the US. Like MEPI, the BMENA Partnership Initiative aimed to encourage reform in the political, the social and cultural, and the economic areas. Both initiatives targeted countries beyond the Arab world—MEPI the Middle East as a whole, BMENA the Middle East plus Pakistan and Afghanistan—but they are examined in this article only in so far as they impact on the core Arab area. On the basis of the assumption that economic liberalization will lead to democratization, the Bush administration also encouraged free trade agreements with Arab governments and envisions the creation of a Middle East free trade area by 2013 (discussion of this is beyond the scope of this article).

The second level of US democracy promotion in the Arab Middle East has been traditional and public diplomacy. Time and again since 2001 public commentators and state officials, not to mention the top administration officials, including the President himself and secretaries of state Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, have emphasized that democratic reform in the Middle East has become a core objective of US policy in the region. One of the most important expressions of this policy was Bush's speech at the National Endowment of Democracy in November 2003, in which democratic change in the Middle East was a main focus.⁷ Promoting reform was a key goal in the launching of Radio Sawa ('Together') and the Al Hurrah ('The free') television station, which target younger audiences in the Arab world with a view to initiating them into American culture and winning them over to American values. Embassy staff in individual Arab states and US government officials in

³ See e.g. the 2002 USAID Report, *Foreign aid in the national interest*, at http://www.usaid.gov/fani/Full_Report—Foreign_Aid_in_the_National_Interest.pdf, accessed 27 June 2005.

⁴ *Arab Human Development Report 2002: Creating opportunities for future generations* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, Sept. 2002).

⁵ US Department of State, 'Middle East Partnership Initiative', at <http://mepi.state.gov/mepi/>, accessed 24 May 2005.

⁶ 'Summit background: partnership for progress and a common future with the region of the Broader Middle East and North Africa', Sea Island, Georgia, 9 June 2004, at http://www.g8usa.gov/d_060904c.htm, accessed 6 Oct. 2004.

⁷ George W. Bush, 'President Bush discusses freedom in Iraq and Middle East: remarks by the President at the 20th anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy', at <http://www.ned.org/events/anniversary/oct1603-Bush.html>, accessed 2 Dec. 2003.

bilateral meetings repeatedly raise specific democracy and human rights issues and concerns with their Arab counterparts.⁸

Finally, on a third level, democracy promotion has become an integral part of an interventionist US foreign policy in the Arab Middle East, epitomized in the invasion and occupation of Iraq. As previously in the case of Afghanistan, the 2003 Iraq war was justified on the grounds of (pre-emptive) self-defence against presumed weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation and terrorism. But democratization was also part of the rationale for military action. It was argued by the US administration that a democratic Iraq would be a natural American ally and that its example would encourage political reform in the Arab world as a whole.

The impact of US democracy promotion policies

Across the Arab Middle East region

Is political change in the Arab Middle East real, albeit tentative, or is it an illusion? Has the impact of the US democracy promotion policies outlined above on the prospects for democratic reform been significant or marginal, positive or negative? How does US pressure for reform compare or combine with domestic pro-democratic forces? Are anti-democratic developments in Arab politics undercutting any steps towards reform and leading the region towards greater authoritarianism? I will seek answers to these questions by examining the Arab Middle Eastern region as a whole, before investigating the impact of US democracy promotion policies on individual countries in the next section.

MEPI and the BMENA Partnership Initiative are two important policy initiatives that the Bush administration has used to promote democracy in the Arab Middle East. MEPI has sponsored over 100 initiatives in 14 countries, including programmes on judicial reform and support and training for journalists; civic education and human rights awareness; strengthening of legislatures; training local and regional government officials in public administration; school curricula and educational exchanges; strengthening political party structures and parliamentary systems; voter education; training for NGOs; and support for women's empowerment.⁹ The main outcome of the BMENA Partnership Initiative was the 'Forum for the Future' meeting in Rabat, Morocco, in December 2004 which brought together foreign, finance and economy ministers, as well as civil society and business representatives, from the BMENA and G8 countries. The meeting endorsed a number of actions in the areas of

⁸ For examples, see US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, *Supporting human rights and democracy: the US record, 2003-4 and 2004-5*, at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/shrd/2003/31022pg.htm> and <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/shrd/2004/31022pg.htm>, accessed 26 July 2004 and 10 May 2005.

⁹ United States Embassy, London, UK fact sheet, 'State Department's Mideast partnership funds over 100 programs', 9 March 2005, at <http://www.usembassy.org.uk/mideast603.html>, accessed 3 May 2005.

democracy assistance, literacy, international finance, micro-finance and investment.¹⁰

The activity described above appears quite considerable; but it is in fact limited in two important ways. First, although both MEPI and the BMENA Partnership Initiative were introduced with much fanfare by the Bush administration as ground-breaking initiatives which would jolt democratic reform into life, the types of project they introduced were very similar to those already carried out under the Clinton administration (and by other western donors); and while these pre-existing projects may have made important contributions, they have clearly not provided a major impetus for reform. Although MEPI added a source of funding devoted exclusively to democracy promotion from the State Department, MEPI projects are similar to USAID's and, indeed, it is US embassies and USAID that have been implementing most of the MEPI programmes. This may be changing; the number of MEPI staff is increasing, and MEPI has recently acquired regional offices in the United Arab Emirates and Tunisia and MEPI is beginning to set somewhat different priorities, to which USAID is increasingly responding.¹¹ But there is no evidence to suggest that MEPI's approach has altered or will fundamentally alter the way democracy is promoted by the US.

The second way in which MEPI and BMENA are limited is in funding. Again, although MEPI made the headlines as an important policy initiative, its initial funding was a paltry \$29 million. This has increased, although not by as much as the Bush administration would like because of the concerns of the House of Representatives' Appropriation Committee over duplication of programmes and the very general terms in which MEPI goals are defined.¹² There is no separate line of funding for the BMENA Partnership Initiative, which is primarily financed through MEPI.¹³ The overall sum of \$293 million for MEPI over four fiscal years must be compared to the bilateral economic assistance of over \$1 billion extended annually to BMENA countries; and it is dwarfed by US expenditure in Iraq and the war on terror generally, which runs into tens of billions of dollars.¹⁴

¹⁰ United States Embassy, London, UK fact sheet, 'Middle East reform forum accomplishments', 11 Dec. 2004, at <http://www.usembassy.org.uk/mideast572.html>, accessed 23 May 2005.

¹¹ Charles Levinson, 'Changing priorities: USAID does good work in the health and education spheres but these programs need to match the US administration's new priorities', *Cairo Times* 8: 7, 15–21 April 2004, p. 9.

¹² Tamara Cofman Wittes and Sarah E. Yerkes, 'The Middle East Partnership Initiative: progress, problems and prospects', 29 Nov. 2004, p. 2 (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution), Saban Center for Middle East Policy memo No. 5, <http://www.brookings.edu/views/op-ed/fellows/wittes20041129.htm>. Bush requested \$145m for FY 2004 but the House Appropriations Committee reduced the funding to \$45m. The figures for FY 2005 are \$150m and \$75m. See Jeremy M. Sharp, *The Middle East Partnership Initiative: an overview*, Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, updated 8 Feb. 2005, pp. 4–5, at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/shrd/2003/31022pg.htm>, accessed 25 May 2005.

¹³ US Department of State fact sheet, 9 March 2005, *State Department's Mideast partnership*, p. 6.

¹⁴ US Department of State, *State Department's Mideast partnership*, p. 2; Dan Ackman, 'Iraq aid will dwarf US foreign aid budget', *Forbes.com*, 9 Aug. 2003, at http://www.forbes.com/2003/09/08/cx_da_0908topnews.html, accessed 27 June 2005.

These two factors clearly limit the impact MEPI and the BMENA Partnership Initiative can have on encouraging democratic reform. However, on the positive side MEPI and the BMENA Partnership Initiative have combined with the Bush administration's very public encouragement of democracy, and the war in Iraq, to initiate a *debate* across the Arab world about the need for reform. Indeed, it has been argued, time and again, that the Bush administration's emphasis on democracy has shaken the Arab Middle East out of its apathy and forced reform on to the agenda in an unprecedented way—even though the discussion on democracy is routinely accompanied by condemnation of the US and its policies in the region. Editorial after editorial in the Arab press has discussed the desirability of reform, and new satellite channels such as Al-Jazeera have defined it as a core Arab issue.¹⁵ The need for reform appears to be accepted by all political players; debates 'have multiplied and taken on a freer, franker character' and discussions have become more frequent and more focused, as arguments increasingly address specific issues, beyond the generic criticisms of Arab regimes.¹⁶ The debate on democracy has encompassed the Islamist movements in the Arab world and, in particular, has encouraged an examination of their attitude towards reform.¹⁷ In response to the debate initiated by US policies and suggestions, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood unveiled its own reform initiative in March 2004, which demanded democratic freedoms and the suspension of emergency law.¹⁸

The response to US democracy promotion policies across the Arab region has also become more organized and has taken the form of regional meetings which have produced pro-reform statements. In January 2004, at a large international conference in Sana'a, Yemen established the Arab Democratic Dialogue Forum. The Alexandria conference of Arab writers, intellectuals and political activists on 'Arab Reform' in March 2004 in its final document called upon Arab governments to implement reforms that include the abolition of states of emergency. In June 2004 the Doha Declaration for Democracy and Reform was adopted at the close of a conference in Qatar attended by over 100 thinkers and politicians from various Arab countries.¹⁹

¹⁵ Marc Lynch, 'Shattering the "politics of silence": satellite television talk shows and the transformation of Arab political culture', *Arab Reform Bulletin* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace) 2: 11, Dec. 2004, pp. 2–3.

¹⁶ Thomas Carothers and Marina Ottaway, 'The new democracy imperative', in Thomas Carothers and Marina Ottaway, eds, *Uncharted journey: promoting democracy in the Middle East* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005), p. 8; Amy Hawthorne, 'The new reform ferment', in Carothers and Ottaway, eds, *Uncharted journey*, pp. 57–77.

¹⁷ Marina Ottaway, 'The problem of credibility', in Carothers and Ottaway, eds, *Uncharted journey*, pp. 185–6.

¹⁸ Gamal Essam El-Din, 'Brotherhood steps into the fray', *Al-Ahram* weekly online, 11–17 March 2004, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2004/681/eg3.htm>.

¹⁹ League of Arab States, 'Sana'a Declaration 10–12 January 2004', 12 Jan. 2004, at http://www.arableagueonline.org/arableague/english/details_en.jsp?art_id=2641&level_id=239, accessed 27 June 2005; Hamdi El-Husseini, "'Alexandria document' calls for serious reforms', *IslamOnline*, 15 March 2004, at <http://www.islamonline.net/English/News/2004-03/15/article05.shtml>, accessed 1 Feb. 2004; 'Doha declaration for democracy and reform', *The Daily Star Regional*, 29 June 2004, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=15&article_id=5705, accessed 26 July 2004.

Clearly, the debate has had considerable impact in that 'many Arab governments have taken steps that signal a growing acceptance of human rights as a legitimate public policy issue'.²⁰ But, on the other hand, it has often been controlled to a considerable degree by governments that want to demonstrate to the international community, and in some cases to their own societies, that change is happening. For example, the May 2004 Arab League Summit referred briefly to political reform in its Tunis Declaration, the first Arab League statement to do so. What forced the issue onto the agenda was the fact that Arab leaders did not want to appear unresponsive to the growing clamour about reform, particularly in light of the imminent G8 summit which was going to introduce the BMENA Partnership Initiative. However, the League's stand on reform was lukewarm, qualified by mention of 'civilizational specificities' and omitting any reference to monitoring mechanisms.²¹ A similar criticism can be levelled at the regional meetings noted above: they were, in fact, mostly government affairs and produced general statements on reform, avoiding the specific country-by-country approach that would offer concrete and useful recommendations for change.²² Whether such gatherings have a substantial and positive impact on encouraging real democratic change remains, therefore, an open question.

In particular Arab countries

What has been the effect of these regional developments on the politics of individual Arab countries? Have they weakened the hold of authoritarian Arab regimes on power?

I argue that we can observe two patterns of US action and Arab reaction with regard to democracy promotion in individual Arab countries: one in 'friends' of the US and another in its 'foes'. The US has put pressure on its allies or friendly states in the Arab Middle East by admonishing them for lack of democratic reform and encouraging them to undertake it. In turn, 'friendly' Arab regimes have initiated reforms, albeit of a limited kind and in a controlled manner. Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Algeria and Morocco, at various times and to various degrees, have improved civil rights and have allowed greater political participation, usually through elections. But in the great majority of these countries reform has not led to a reduction of the leaders' powers. Elections, although hailed by the US as a real breakthrough, do not necessarily entail the genuine contestation of power. More often than not, because they cannot really be won by the opposition, elections allow semi-authoritarian regimes to open political space without affecting the status quo.²³

²⁰ Hawthorne, 'The new reform ferment', p. 73.

²¹ Nicholas Blanford, 'The Arab League and political reform: a vague commitment', *Arab Reform Bulletin* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace) 2: 6, June 2004, pp. 7–8.

²² Charles Levinson, 'NGOs barely at conference', *Cairo Times* 8: 4, 25–31 March 2004, p. 10; Said El-Naggar, 'The Alexandria statement', *Wafd* newspaper, 25 April 2004, trans. Ahmed Ezzelrab and Robert Springborg (unofficial communication).

²³ Marina Ottaway and Thomas Carothers, 'Getting to the core', in Carothers and Ottaway, eds, *Uncharted Journey*, p. 262.

In cases where more fundamental change has taken place, for example in Bahrain and Qatar (where some limitations on the powers of the rulers and greater political openness and respect for civil rights were introduced), it was primarily in response to domestic imperatives, not US pressure. Even so, in these two cases, as in all others mentioned above, reforms have been retracted as often as they have been initiated, in a permanent 'see-saw' of manipulation.²⁴

Egypt is perhaps the best illustration of these ambiguous forces and influences. Since 2001 Egypt has been a main target of US democracy promotion because of its pivotal role in the Arab world and closeness to the US. Hosni Mubarak's regime has responded by initiating reforms such as creating the Human Rights Council, reforming the National Democratic Party and introducing multiparty contestation of the presidential elections. He has also allowed some open expression of political dissent and has given more leeway to critics of the regime. Arguably this greater openness has given an opportunity to informal opposition groups, such as the 'Tahrir' and 'Kefaya' movements, which galvanized anti-regime protests in 2003 and 2004–5 respectively, and to the country's professionals, most importantly its judges, to demand reforms.²⁵ In all this, we can see the synergy between US pressure and the debate for reform that it helped initiate at the domestic level. However, the reforms themselves, notably of the presidential contest, have been largely cosmetic. US attention to particular opposition figures such as Ayman Nur, leader of the newly constituted Al Ghad party, has damaged their credibility because a campaign against foreign interference has swept Egypt. Indeed, US attention has been so unwelcome that Nur and Al Ghad have publicly distanced themselves from the US.²⁶

Democracy promotion in 'foes' of the US takes a very different form. In the cases of Syria, Libya and the Palestinians, the US has pursued the demand for democratic reform in tandem with security objectives such as containing the threats of terrorism and WMD and protecting Israel. This means that the pursuit of democracy has been more forceful, but also that it has been abandoned easily once the security objectives were achieved. Arab 'foes' have responded accordingly, in some cases manipulating the democracy issue to suit their own interests, and the net impact of US pressure on pro-democracy forces has been ambiguous.

Syria was described by the Bush administration in 2002 as part of an 'axis of evil', and the US has put pressure on it to renounce its WMD programme and desist from aiding the Iraqi insurgency. Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon would contribute to achieving these goals. Security Council Resolution 1559 of September 2004, which called for Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon, also declared its support for 'a free and fair electoral process in Lebanon's upcoming

²⁴ Daniel Brumberg, 'Liberalization versus democracy', in Carothers and Ottaway, eds, *Uncharted journey*, pp. 15–35.

²⁵ Even the apparently acquiescent Human Rights Council has been critical of the regime. See Paul Schemm, 'Presidential démarche', *Middle East International*, no. 749, 29 April 2005, pp. 10–12.

²⁶ Paul Schemm, 'Grand gesture', *Middle East International*, no. 745, 4 March 2005, and 'Political traffic', *Middle East International*, no. 747, 1 April 2005.

presidential elections'. This was a reference to the unconstitutional extension of the pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud's term in office in September 2004. The assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005 created a *furor* in Lebanon against Syrian occupation and accelerated the process that led to the withdrawal of Syrian forces in April 2005.

US pressure presumably emboldened the Lebanese anti-Syrian coalition movement, thereby contributing to the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon (the restoration of sovereignty being, of course, a *sine qua non* for the functioning of democracy in Lebanon). But it may be that the anti-Syrian movement was created *despite* US pressure, because some Lebanese were reluctant to be seen as being close to the Americans.²⁷ A similarly ambiguous impact of US attention to democracy may be observed within Syria itself. On the one hand, it may have emboldened opposition activists to take an anti-regime stand.²⁸ However, a crackdown on opposition forces in Syria took place after the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, leading to speculation that now that Syria had 'satisfied' US security concerns the democracy issue would be dropped.²⁹ A similar development has been observed in the case of Libya, where US attention to domestic reform petered out once Qadhafi had abandoned his WMD programme (whatever its true dimensions may have been) in December 2003.³⁰

US democracy promotion has taken credit for democratic reform in the Palestinian case. The US and Israel maintained that the terrorist violence of the post-2000 intifada was caused by corruption and authoritarianism in the Palestinian Authority—the assumption being that a democratically elected Palestinian government would eschew violence and opt for peaceful negotiations with Israel (along the lines of the democratic peace thesis). The death of Arafat in November 2004 created an opportunity for elections at presidential, municipal and national legislative levels. The unsustainable internal situation in the Occupied Territories and domestic demands for reform combined with US pressure to jolt the process into being. But although US pressure on the Palestinian Authority was forceful it was also selective, depending on whether democracy was perceived to suit US and Israeli interests. When Marwan Barghouti, who was not deemed to be an appropriate candidate, declared his intention to run for the presidency against Mahmud Abbas, there was clearly no rejoicing by the US government that the elections would be contested in a democratic fashion. When Mahmud Abbas postponed the parliamentary elections of July 2005 because of fears of further Hamas gains subsequent to

²⁷ International Crisis Group, 'Hizbollah: rebel without a cause?', Middle East Briefing, 30 July 2003, <http://www.icg.org/home/index.cfm?id=1828&i=1>, p. 2, accessed 19 Oct. 2004.

²⁸ Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), special dispatch no. 668, 'Syrian intellectuals petition for democratisation and reform', 1 March 2004.

²⁹ Arab Program for Human Rights Activists, 'Is it a deal? The withdrawal from Lebanon for a free hand in domestic affairs?', email communiqué, 26 May 2005.

³⁰ Alison Pargeter, 'Libya: reform or rhetoric?', *Civility Review* (Foreign Policy Centre) 1: 1, 11 June 2004, p. 2.

their successes in the municipal elections, the US appeared to acquiesce without objection.

If US democracy promotion has had an ambiguous impact on both friend and foe in the Arab world, what about democratization as a result of military intervention in the case of Iraq? It was argued—rightly, albeit with some exaggeration—that the ousting of Saddam Hussein caused the first real ‘conversation’ in the Arab world about political reform for a long time.³¹ The elections of January 2005 in particular, which led to the formation of a new Iraqi government, were hailed as a breakthrough in Iraqi and regional politics—which they were.³² It is undeniable that, compared to the situation prevailing under the Saddam Hussein regime, political participation and debate have increased in Iraq. This is a result of the recognition on the part of many Iraqis that political compromise and tolerance are the only way to hold the country together—and the clear understanding that the US will not accept anything less than a democracy in Iraq (even if this is confined to shallow institutions or even a façade). However, the American handling of occupied Iraq has undermined the prospect of long-term democratization by strengthening sectarian and ethnic divisions between Shi’is, Sunnis and Kurds, and indirectly encouraging the re-Islamization of Iraqi politics. There is a strong probability, furthermore, that women’s rights will be downgraded in the emerging Iraqi polity. Above all, the continuing violent insurgency against the regime and US occupation encourages continued reliance on security and military measures, to the detriment of human rights and democratic freedoms. Clearly, democracy cannot flourish in the present desperate situation in Iraq, and the relentless violence is seriously undermining the prospect of its eventual democratization.

It is not the purpose of this article to assess the prospects for democratization in the Arab Middle East. Doing so would require a different kind of analysis from the one offered above: an analysis that would start by outlining different regime types in the region (for example, monarchies; military regimes; rentier states; Islamic states) and assessing the prospects for democracy in each type. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that some regime types (monarchical, for example) appear at the present stage to have more potential for reform than others, and that some of these regime types, in turn, may be more amenable to outside intervention in the area of democratization. It is also possible that US democracy promotion efforts, particularly if they are sustained beyond the current Bush administration, will have long-term positive consequences in encouraging reform in ways that cannot be predicted at present. On the basis of the evidence presently to hand, however, my overall assessment of US

³¹ Thomas L. Friedman, ‘At least Iraq’s got the Arabs talking’, *International Herald Tribune*, 20 Feb. 2004.

³² US private contractors have worked to refashion Iraq’s legal, economic, social and political institutions. Forums and workshops were organized for local council and NGO leaders, and ‘tribal democracy centres’ were established across Iraq ‘to encourage sheikhs and tribal leaders to take the required classes’. Every week, after flag ceremonies in elementary and secondary schools, teachers of ‘democracy’ were given five minutes to expound on various concepts. Herbert Doneca, ‘Silent battalions of “democracy”’, *Middle East Report*, no. 232, Fall 2004, p. 16.

democracy promotion in individual Arab states is that, despite some achievements, it has suffered from serious limitations. The reasons for these are outlined in the following sections.

A threefold critique

The political context of democracy promotion

The limitations of US democracy promotion in the Arab Middle East can be accounted for once the policy is placed in the wider context of US foreign policy towards the Arab world. It is an obvious point that the Bush administration has had to balance democracy promotion with US security concerns in the region. Although the Bush administration has argued that this is not an 'either/or' choice and that democracy is complementary to security, in practice contradictions have become painfully apparent.

These contradictions are exacerbated by the 'war on terror'. Although one may possibly accept the Bush administration's argument that, in the long term, democratization will help undercut Islamist terrorism, it has been obvious since 2001 that, at least *in the short term*, the war on terror has caused restrictions on civil liberties and a limitation of democratic freedoms, particularly in the case of Islamist opposition movements. In the name of fighting terrorism, many Arab governments—like many western governments—have increased anti-democratic practices, and the US government has been quick to accept their justification for doing so. The war on terror therefore can be seen to be pushing both the Bush administration and the Arab region in the opposite direction from democracy promotion. This is all the more so because the war on terror has made Arabs, and other Muslims, defensive about identity and has further radicalized Islamist movements.³³ Ultimately, the war on terror, far from promoting democracy in the Middle East, may be pushing the Arab world since 2001 towards *more*, not less, authoritarianism.

I argued in the previous section that the US government has approached the democracy issue differently with its Arab 'friends' and with its 'foes'. This distinction has given rise to the charge of *inconsistency*, because it reinforces the appearance that the US will not press friendly regimes too far, lest they be destabilized by democratic reforms, and that it will be content with the limited reforms which will not threaten those regimes' hold on power. The unabashed neo-conservative assertion that the US will commit money and troops to support democracy only when its vital interests are affected further reinforces the impression that democracy is a secondary goal when juxtaposed with vital security concerns.³⁴

³³ Maria Holt, 'Islam and democracy: impact on Arab Muslim women in the 21st century', *Civility Review* (Foreign Policy Centre), June 2005, pp. 3–4; Graham Fuller, 'Islamists and democracy', in Carothers and Ottaway, eds, *Uncharted journey*, pp. 37–55.

³⁴ Charles Krauthammer, in Timothy J. Lynch, 'Neoconservative visions of political Islam', paper presented at the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) Joint Sessions, Granada, Spain, 14–19 April 2005, p. 12.

US behaviour when confronted with stark choices between democratic liberties and security concerns has further reinforced the picture of inconsistency. For example, the US appeared to be disregarding freedom of expression and freedom of the press in Iraq when the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) shut down or suspended some newspapers and broadcasters for violating CPA standards (a practice continued by the Iraqi government after it took over in June 2004). Colin Powell and Donald Rumsfeld complained to the ruler of Qatar that Al-Jazeera was virulently anti-American and should be reined in.³⁵ The US was clearly inconsistent, too, in the case of anti-government opposition in Egypt, when it protested at the arrest of Ayman Nur (in January 2005) but remained silent over the arrests of hundreds of Muslim Brothers over subsequent months.

The charge that US policy is inconsistent when it comes to democracy in the Arab Middle East is intimately connected to the problem of *credibility* that attends the US as a promoter of democracy in the region. This became apparent in the hostility and scepticism, bordering on incredulity, with which the Arab world reacted to the announcement of MEPI and the BMENA Partnership Initiative. The reasons for this lack of credibility lie in US policy towards the region over the last few decades, during which the US has frequently allied itself with authoritarian regimes and has supported Israel against the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people. Currently, US policy on the Israeli–Palestinian issue, which is seen to be overly pro-Israeli, and the war in Iraq have led to a dramatic deterioration of the US image in the region³⁶—a deterioration that has not been halted by public diplomacy instruments such as Radio Sawa and other attempts to improve that image.³⁷ The lack of credibility undercuts many US efforts to promote democracy. For example, even while MEPI spends money on organizing visits and exchange programmes between the US and Arab countries, there has been in recent years a *drop* in the numbers of young people from the Gulf going to study in US universities.³⁸

³⁵ William A. Rugh, 'Washington and the challenge of Arab press freedom', *Arab Reform Bulletin* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace) 2: 11, Dec. 2004, pp. 6–7.

³⁶ A series of Pew Research Centre reports attest to the unpopularity of the US in the Muslim world and particularly in the Middle East. Anger and even hatred of the US increased dramatically in the two years following the Iraq war of 2003, although these feelings appear to be easing somewhat in some Muslim countries in 2005, with some credit being given to US democratization efforts in the Middle East as well. See the Pew Research Centre, 'A year after the Iraq war', 16 March 2004, at <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=206>; 'US image up slightly, but still negative', 23 June 2005 <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=247>, both accessed 2 Sept. 2005.

³⁷ Radio Sawa was criticized in a State Department report for concentrating too much on pop music and not enough on influencing Arab minds: Edward P. Djerejian, *Changing minds, winning peace*, Report of the Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, 1 Oct. 2003, at <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/24882.pdf>, accessed 28 June 2005. On the ineffectiveness of public relations efforts to improve the US image, see John M. McNeel, 'America, spare Arabs the spin', *International Herald Tribune*, 9 June 2005.

³⁸ *UNDP Arab Human Development Report 2003: building a knowledge society* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, 2003), p. 21.

The conception of democracy

Public opinion in the Arab world tends to interpret the purported US concern with democratic reform in the region as outright hypocrisy. It seldom entertains the possibility that 'the Bush administration might actually be committed to democracy for its own sake', and most commentators do not 'even seriously consider that the US might be interested in democracy for instrumental reasons, namely to prevent terrorism'.³⁹ The conviction, instead, is that there is a hidden agenda, for example to help Israel control the Palestinians, to control Iraqi oilfields, or generally to extend American hegemony. I argue that this is an inaccurate description of the US position and that the Bush administration is serious about democracy, both as a pragmatic means of eliminating terrorism *and* as an ideal. By contrast, the real problem with the democracy promotion policies of the Bush administration is the way in which the neo-conservative ideology, which has come to dominate it, conceives democracy: as (among other things) 'something that will put right all troubles'—a *panacea*.

Arguably, there is nothing new here; there was in the post-Cold War euphoria of the Clinton administration an assumption that democracy would right all wrongs. For example, the 1994 *National Security Strategy of Enlargement and Engagement* stated that 'democratic states are less likely to threaten our interests and more likely to cooperate with the US to meet security threats and promote free trade and sustainable development', although the term 'democracy' was only imprecisely defined.⁴⁰ But the Bush administration, reflecting the dominant neo-conservative elements within it, is even more fervent in its conviction that democracy presents the solution to a great variety of problems. Neo-conservatism combines the liberal aim of democratization with the realist means of implementing hard power in the assumption that 'the spread of liberal democracy improves US security'.⁴¹ Its policy prescriptions on democracy draw on an assumed parallel between Islam and the communist world in the Cold War period. Neo-conservatism embraces the democratic peace theory and holds that democratic reform 'is also essential to a peaceful resolution of the longstanding Arab-Israeli dispute'.⁴² But the mechanism whereby all this will be achieved is not outlined. For example, it is not clear 'exactly what values should be shared, how fully they must be shared, and who in each country should share them'. Instead, 'as states become more democratic, it is thought that they will begin to share American values. This, it follows, should increase the number of states willing to cooperate with the US government on foreign policy and security matters'.⁴³

³⁹ Ottaway, 'The problem of credibility', pp. 178–9.

⁴⁰ *A national security strategy of engagement and enlargement* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office), Feb. 1995, p. i, quoted in P. H. Liotta and James F. Miskel, 'Dangerous democracy? American internationalism and the greater Near East', *Orbis* 48: 3, Summer 2002, pp. 440–1.

⁴¹ Lynch, 'Neoconservative visions', p. 20.

⁴² Zbigniew Brzezinski, 'How not to spread democracy: Bush's greater Middle East initiative', *International Herald Tribune*, 9 March 2004.

⁴³ Liotta and Miskel, 'Dangerous democracy?', p. 442.

The problem with such a conception of democracy is that it ignores the possibility that democratization in the Arab world may have a number of outcomes unpalatable for the US. These could include, for instance, Islamists taking power; a restriction of women's rights; a shift against US interests (as, to take an example from outside the Arab world, in the March 2003 decision of the Turkish parliament not to allow the US to use bases in south-eastern Turkey for its invasion of Iraq); and general political instability. These developments would contradict both US values and US interests.

Even if the Bush administration has foreseen these costs and judged that they are outweighed by the benefits that democratization will bring (which is a possibility), the problem remains that there is no clear thinking about *how* democratic change will be brought about. Carothers has described this as a problem of knowledge, in that practitioners know what the desired outcome is but 'do not know what the process of change consists of and how it might be brought about'.⁴⁴ He has also pointed out that there is 'notably little real discussion of what the process of going from point A (blocked semiauthoritarianism) to point B (democracy) might look like'.⁴⁵ This is particularly the case for the MEPI and BMENA Partnership Initiatives, which did not set out any clear steps by which their proposed projects would be linked to the desired outcome of the executive giving up power. The lack of a clear strategy for how to achieve democracy is also intimately linked with the US administration's reluctance to tackle the Islamist issue head-on. Whatever form or route democratization takes in the Arab world, Islamists will have to be part of the process in one way or another; but the US administration has not considered at least openly, how this will be achieved. Also lacking is a realistic assessment by the Bush administration of the scale of commitment that democratization requires, particularly when it comes to military enforcement of it. This is most evident in Iraq, but it appears to be the case for the peaceful promotion of democracy as well. The following exchange between an EU official and a congressional staffer on the BMENA Partnership Initiative, reported by the International Crisis Group, gives an indication of the lack of realism on the US side:

Congressional staffer: This isn't a one-shot project. We need to stay with it consistently for two–three years.

EU official: I was thinking more like forty years.

Congressional staffer: Yes, you're right—at least four years.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Thomas Carothers, *Promoting the rule of law abroad: the problem of knowledge*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Rule of Law Series, Democracy and Rule of Law Project, working paper no. 34, Jan. 2003, p. 9.

⁴⁵ Thomas Carothers, 'Choosing a strategy', in Carothers and Ottaway, eds, *Uncharted journey*, p. 196.

⁴⁶ International Crisis Group, *The Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative: imperilled at birth*, Middle East and North Africa Briefing, 7 June 2004, p. 12, quoting an ICG interview in Paris, May 2004, at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=2795&l=1>.

The inherent limitations of democracy promotion

The impact of democracy promotion policies tends to be limited and to benefit specific projects. Such policies will not, as a rule, create a trend for democratization where no such trend already exists; they can only reinforce a democratization process once it is already under way.⁴⁷ Democracy is difficult to transpose even through military intervention, and one can point to a long list of failures in that attempt, including most recently in the Balkans. Moreover, if democracy promotion policies in general have limited outcomes, the Arab world suffers from the additional problem that it has not been part of the democracy promotion industry in the past 25 years; so few western experts on Arab politics have direct knowledge of democracy promotion, and few western experts on democracy promotion have knowledge of Arab politics.⁴⁸

The reality of limited outcomes becomes even more stark when it is contrasted with the inflated expectations of what US democracy promotion policies could achieve in the Arab Middle East. Why, then, are these policies not getting results? Many argue that it is because of the US's preferred democracy strategy, at least at the level of democracy promotion projects carried out by USAID and MEPI, of emphasizing civil society organizations, and in particular human rights NGOs, and providing technical assistance to parts of the state such as legislatures and judiciaries. The problem with this approach is that civil society organizations, and in particular human rights groups, are weak and unrepresentative of wider societal concerns.⁴⁹ The beneficial outcomes of technical assistance and support for legislatures and judiciaries are limited because parliaments and judges do not really have powers to curb the executive. More controversially, Marina Ottaway has argued that attention to women's rights is a diversion from democracy promotion because, although individual programmes for women's rights will make a difference for the women involved, they are unlikely to encourage the weakening of executive power.⁵⁰

Clearly, the democracy promotion initiatives pursued by the US administration cannot themselves dislodge entrenched elites from power; it has even been argued that, on the contrary, they help them retain it. 'Liberalized autocracies' not only permit but also promote the growth of non-governmental or quasi-governmental organizations, because they provide many state services while the government retains ultimate control, and because they further divide the opposition. Daniel Brumberg has made this point succinctly:

⁴⁷ I have developed these views with specific reference to the Middle East in my *Engagement or coercion? Weighing western human rights policies towards Turkey, Iran and Egypt* (London: Chatham House, 2003). Thomas Carothers, *Aiding democracy abroad: the learning curve* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999).

⁴⁸ Carothers and Ottaway, 'The new democracy imperative', pp. 9–10.

⁴⁹ In Egypt, advocacy NGOs constitute 0.4% of the total number; cynics dub them 'conference-promotion NGOs'. See Emad El-Din Shahin, *Political Islam: ready for engagement?*, La Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Dialogo Exterior (FRIDE) working paper no. 3, Feb. 2005, p. 7. See also Amy Hawthorne, 'Is civil society the answer?', in Carothers and Ottaway, eds, *Uncharted journey*.

⁵⁰ Marina Ottaway, 'Don't confuse women's rights and democracy', *International Herald Tribune*, 30 March 2004.

For wily 'reformists' such as Egypt's Mubarak, it is better to have 5,000 small civil society organizations than five big ones, because many competing NGOs impede social activists' cooperation. This is one reason why in the 1990s the rulers of Morocco and Egypt fostered the growth of thousands of semi-independent organizations. American democracy promoters encouraged this trend because they mistakenly assumed that civil society organizations had the capacity to push for democratic changes. What these democracy promoters failed to recognize is that such organizations could not compensate for the absence of well-organized political parties or truly representative parliaments.⁵¹

Many analysts have recognized the limitations of the politically neutral and gradualist approach that the Bush administration has pursued since 2001 (at least in terms of its allies) and have argued that a more forceful policy is needed to encourage democratization. For example, it is argued that MEPI and the BMENA Partnership Initiative must introduce the principle of conditionality, and that countries must be rewarded or 'punished' depending on their progress on democracy and human rights. For instance, Natan Sharansky suggests that the West must use its leverage with Arab countries: 'The US, for example, might insist that if the Saudi regime wants American protection, it will have to change its draconian emigration policies and improve its record on women's rights.'⁵² But how would this be achieved, given that the legitimacy of the Saudi regime is already seriously undermined because of its close association with the US? In another context, Robert Satloff argues that the Middle East's forward-thinking journalists, editors, screenwriters, television producers and film directors 'need money and political support, not just training, but the G-8 proposal offers little of either'.⁵³ But he does not explain how the state would be bypassed in order to offer these. How would the US acquire the detailed knowledge of local conditions to implement such a policy? Although a forceful strategy appears to be the only way of getting 'results', in actual fact it is unworkable.

It may also be counterproductive. It appears very persuasive, at face value, to argue that the US must support the embryonic liberal movement in the Arab world. Among many others Sharansky suggests that, for democracy promotion to work, governments, the media and human rights activists in the West, as in the Helsinki process, must shine the spotlight on dissidents within the Arab world. 'International scrutiny will give more and more Arabs who support democracy the courage to step forward.'⁵⁴ But there is no equivalence between the way the US was viewed in communist Eastern Europe and how it is now perceived in the Arab world so this would be a disastrous route to take. Although there is no doubt that democratization in the Arab world will come about only as a result of political conflict, US interference, *even more so if it is*

⁵¹ Brumberg, 'Liberalization versus democracy', pp. 21–2.

⁵² Natan Sharansky, 'The Middle East needs its Helsinki', *International Herald Tribune*, 30 March 2004.

⁵³ Robert Satloff, *The greater Middle East partnership: a work still very much in progress*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch no. 836, 25 Feb. 2004, p. 2.

⁵⁴ Sharansky, 'The Middle East needs its Helsinki'.

forceful, will undermine pro-democratic forces. In the current political climate in the Arab world, any opposition groups or individual activists associated with the US are deeply suspect in the eyes of their fellow citizens.⁵⁵ Although in some cases democracy promoters are emboldened by perceived US support for their cause, more often they fear being associated with it. Discussing the setbacks suffered by liberals in Kuwait's July 2003 elections, R. G. Khuri argues: 'The defeat of liberals was probably much influenced by the American politics in the Middle East. President Bush's initiative to bring democracy to the region while occupying Iraq "sends many native liberals and democrats under their beds" worrying of being labelled as American puppets.'⁵⁶ Liberals tend to be an elite minority among politically active Arabs. Their association with the West would weaken them even further.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

US democracy promotion policies in the Arab Middle East since 2001 have had mixed results. Achievements include bringing more attention to the lack of democracy in the region; initiating a debate about reform; emboldening opposition movements; and making the need for change a given, accepted by both publics and governments. But these achievements are juxtaposed with many failures: Arab governments have undertaken superficial reforms to undercut the need for substantial change, and US policies and the Arab debate they have encouraged have been unable directly to weaken authoritarian Arab governments' hold on power—although it is possible that they may do so in the long run, at least in the case of some regimes.

I have argued that there are three core reasons why US democracy promotion policies in the region have had a limited impact. First, democracy is part of a wider set of US interests and policies with which it is frequently in contradiction, and US credibility is so low in the Arab Middle East that the US message of democracy is often rejected together with the messenger. Second, the Bush administration conceives democracy as a panacea and overlooks the problems its implementation may cause; it also lacks clear ideas about how to achieve this implementation. Third, democracy promotion policies have limited outcomes because neither a politically neutral nor a more forceful approach can initiate reform if it is not already under way for domestic reasons; a forceful approach could even be counterproductive for the weak liberal movements in the Arab Middle East.

Does the above analysis suggest that the cause of democracy in the Arab Middle East, on balance, would benefit if the US abandoned it altogether? This is not implausible, but it is currently politically unfeasible, at least for the

⁵⁵ For a fascinating discussion of how international attention undermined the campaign against honour crimes in Jordan, see Janine A. Clark, "'Honor crimes" and the international spotlight on Jordan', *Middle East Report*, no. 229, Winter 2003, pp. 38–41.

⁵⁶ R. G. Khuri, 'Kuwait's election and the freezing of Arab politics', *Daily Star*, 10 July 2003.

remainder of the Bush administration. Given that democracy is 'here to stay', and on the basis of the critiques suggested above, what the US can do is improve its policies in the following ways:

- 1 Reduce attention to the terrorist issue at the rhetorical level and ensure as much as reasonably possible that the 'war on terror' does not undermine civil liberties and democratic freedoms.
- 2 Reduce the gap between the democracy promotion policies adopted towards the 'friends' of the US and those applied to its 'foes'.
- 3 Desist from making 'democracy' a secondary objective once security and economic objectives have been achieved.
- 4 Protest against the violation of the political rights of non-violent Islamist opposition groups and the violation of the human rights of all Islamists.
- 5 Engage with non-violent Islamist opposition elements, without appearing to patronize them, and encourage the building of coalitions between them and secular opposition movements.
- 6 Avoid conditionality and directly and publicly supporting pro-democracy forces.
- 7 Work towards achieving an equitable peace between Israel and the Palestinians.
- 8 Stay the course in Iraq until a workable and democratic government is in place, while announcing conditions for its eventual withdrawal.