People in the Middle East want political freedom, and their governments acknowledge the need for reform. Yet the region appears to repel democracy. Arab regimes only concede women’s rights and elections to appease their critics at home and abroad. If democracy arrives in the Middle East, it won’t be due to the efforts of liberal activists or their Western supporters but to the very same Islamist parties that many now see as the chief obstacle to change.

“The Middle East Is the Last Holdout Against the Global Democratic Trend”

No. The Middle East is on the wrong side of the global democratic divide, but unfortunately it does not lack company. As Russia slides into authoritarianism, the former Soviet Union is becoming a democratic wasteland with only a few shaky pockets of pluralism, such as Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. Central Asia is no better off than the Arab world in terms of democracy. A depressingly large swath of East and Southeast Asia—from North Korea and China down through Vietnam, Laos, and Burma to Malaysia and Singapore—is a democracy-free zone that shows few signs of change.

Nor was the Middle East immune to the “Third Wave,” the decisive expansion of democracy that started in southern Europe and Latin America 30 years ago and subsequently spread to other parts of the world. During the 1980s, several Arab countries, including Egypt, Tunisia, and Jordan, initiated political reforms to permit multiparty competition. These reforms lost momentum or were undone in the 1990s, however, as Arab leaders proved unwilling to risk their own power through genuine processes of democratization. Tunisia, for example, moved back to rigid authoritarian rule.

Today, political reform is percolating again in the region, amid growing public frustration over chronic corruption, poor socioeconomic performance, and a pervasive sense of stagnation. The Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks also created pressure for reform—from both the United States and some Arabs who began to question why their societies were so widely viewed as dangerous political cesspools. Talk about political reform and democracy is rife even in the Gulf monarchies where such issues had been taboo. The steps taken thus far in most countries, however, are modest. Although the Arab world is not impervious to political change, it has yet to truly begin the process of democratization.

“Democracy in the Middle East Is Impossible Until the Arab-Israeli Conflict Is Resolved”

Wrong. Arab governments curb political participation, manipulate elections, and limit freedom of expression because they do not want their power challenged, not because tension with Israel requires draconian social controls. When the government of Kuwait refuses to give women the right to vote, it does so out of deference to the most conservative elements of its population, not out of fear that voting women will undermine the country’s security. Fear of competition, not of a Zionist plot, leads the Egyptian ruling party to oppose competitive presidential elections. When it comes to democratic reform, the Zionist threat is merely a convenient excuse.

Yet failure to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict prevents the United States from gaining credibility as an advocate of democracy in the Middle East. Liberal Arabs perceive claims by the United States that it wants democracy in the Middle East as hypocritical, pointing to what they see as American indifference to the rights of the Palestinians and unconditional support for Israel.
their part, many Arab governments do not take U.S. pressure to democratize their region seriously, believing that the need for oil and fear of upsetting regimes that recognize Israel will trump Washington’s desire for democratic change. U.S. credibility in the Middle East will not be restored—and the unprecedented level of anti-American resentment will not abate—until the United States makes a serious, balanced effort to tackle the conflict. Without such credibility, Washington’s effort to stimulate democratization in the region will be severely constrained.

“The United States Wants Democracy in the Middle East”

Up to a point. The democratic transformation of the Middle East emerged as a central objective of U.S. foreign policy during the Bush administration. This new policy is a sharp reversal of several decades of steadfast support for many autocratic regimes in the region, such as those in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. It reflects the new post-9/11 conventional wisdom that Middle East democracy is the best antidote to Islamist terrorism.

Although this desire for democracy may be heartfelt, the United States has a lengthy laundry list of other priorities in the region: access to oil, cooperation and assistance on counterterrorism, fostering peace between Israel and its neighbors, stemming the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and preventing Islamist radicals from seizing power.

The newfound U.S. enthusiasm for democracy competes for a place in this mix. Fighting Islamist militants and safeguarding oil still compels the United States to cooperate with authoritarian regimes. People in the region watched as the United States took a tough line against Iran and Syria while failing to push Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Tunisia, or other friendly tyrants very hard. The Bush administration launched new diplomatic endeavors and aid programs to support positive change, such as the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative and the Middle East Partnership Initiative. But they consist of mild, gradual measures designed to promote democratic change without unduly challenging the authority of incumbent governments.

Moreover, despite the president’s conviction that democratic change in the Middle East is necessary, a great deal of ambivalence remains within the U.S. policy bureaucracy about the prospect of any rapid political openings in the region. This sentiment is particularly true of the State Department and the intelligence community. Some experts worry that, given the political mood of most Arab citizens—who are angry at the United States and sympathetic to political Islam—free and open elections could result in some distinctly unfriendly regimes.

“The War in Iraq Advanced the Cause of Democracy in the Middle East”

Not yet. The U.S.-led war in Iraq removed from power one of the most heinous, repressive dictators in the region and opened up the possibility that Iraq will one day have a pluralistic political system held together by consensus rather than violence. The actual achievement of democracy in Iraq, however, remains distant and uncertain. The path to that goal will be measured in years rather than months.

The war’s political effects in the rest of the region—especially the way it exposed the hollowness of Saddam Hussein’s regime—has contributed to increased calls for political reform in many Arab countries. Real progress toward democracy, however, is minimal. In addition, the war provoked some Arab governments, such as Egypt, to limit the already constrained political space they allow as a defensive gesture against public protests and as an excuse for prosecuting opponents.

Regrettably, President George W. Bush’s repeated justification of the war as a democratizing mission has discredited some Western-oriented Arab democrats in the eyes of their fellow
citizens. Many Arabs have come to view democracy itself as a code word for U.S. regional domination. The unpopularity of the war and the abuses against Iraqis at Abu Ghraib prison have further tarnished the reputation of the United States and fueled Islamist extremism.

Proponents of democratic contagion argue that if Iraq holds successful elections in early 2005, this example will resound loudly in the Arab world. But much of the Arab world will likely view such elections, even if they come off well, as highly flawed. Some parts of the predominantly Sunni areas of Iraq are not expected to participate in the elections, and many Arabs will inevitably accuse the United States of manipulation, because the elections will be held under U.S. occupation. Few Arabs will be dazzled into holding a new view of democracy on the basis of one election. Many countries in the region already hold elections of varying degrees of seriousness and importance, including one in Algeria earlier this year, which a Western observer described as “one of the best conducted elections, not just in Algeria, but in Africa and much of the Arab world.”

Promoting democracy throughout the Middle East will require doing away with fantasies of a sudden U.S.-led transformation of the region and taking seriously the challenge of building credibility with Arab societies. Moreover, if the United States is to play a constructive supporting role, it must seriously revise its cozy relations with autocratic regimes, show a sustained ability to apply nuanced diplomatic pressure for political change at key junctures, and back up this pressure with well-crafted and well-funded assistance. Washington must prepare to accept emboldened political forces, and eventually new governments, that are uninterested in doing the United States’ bidding. Embracing Middle East democracy in principle is easy; truly supporting it remains an enormous challenge.

“Islamists Are the Main Obstacle to Arab Democracy”

Think again. The standard fear is the “one person, one vote, one time” scenario: Islamists would only participate in elections to win power and put an end to democracy immediately. Hence, the argument goes, they should not be allowed to participate.

True, the commitment to democracy of even moderate Islamists is uncertain and hedged by the caveat that democratic governments must accept Islamic law. However, the chances of an overwhelming electoral victory that would allow Islamists to abrogate all freedoms at once is remote in the Arab world. During the last decade, Islamist parties and candidates have participated in elections in eight Arab countries (Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, and Yemen), always with modest results. (These elections suffered from various degrees of government interference, but there is no indication that the Islamists would have won in a more open environment.) And Turkey, a country where an Islamist party took power with a large majority, is becoming an encouraging example of democratic success.

Although the prediction that Islamist electoral victories would lead to democracy’s demise in the Middle East have so far proved unfounded, the possibility cannot be ruled out. Fear of such takeovers remains in many Arab countries and the United States. Many Arab regimes use this fear to justify meddling in elections and placing restrictions on political participation. The presence of Islamist parties thus complicates the process of democratization.

But Islamist parties are also integral to democratization because they are the only nongovernmental parties with large constituencies. Without their participation, democracy is impossible in the Middle East. The future of democracy in the region depends on whether a sufficient number of such parties moderate their political views and become actors in a democratic process, rather than spoilers in the present autocratic states, and whether incumbent
governments stop hiding behind the Islamist threat and accept that all their citizens have a right to participate.

“Arab Countries Have a Historic Propensity Toward Authoritarianism”

Yes. But so what? Most societies have lived under authoritarian rule for some time, often for a long time. Democracy is a relatively recent historical phenomenon. Even in the United States and Europe it was only consolidated through universal suffrage in the last century.

Arab rulers have been highly authoritarian, but no more so than European or Asian rulers for most of history. Arabs developed a political system based on Islam through the caliph, an individual who served as supreme leader of all Muslims. Europeans clung to the concept of the Holy Roman Empire for centuries after it ceased to exist in practice, fought ferocious religious wars for hundreds of years, and adopted the concept of separation of church and state rather late and incompletely. The Arab world, for most of its history, was quite similar to the rest of the world.

Even in the 1960s and 1970s, much of the Arab world was highly representative of the major political trends of the day. Most Arab countries outside the Gulf displayed the combination of nationalism and socialism that constituted typical Third World ideology at the time. Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, alongside Jawaharlal Nehru in India and Marshal Tito in Yugoslavia, was a major champion of this ideology, which waned in the 1980s with the end of the Cold War and the rise of globally connected economies.

To ascribe the lingering Arab absence of democracy to some unique historic affinity for authoritarianism, stemming from Arab culture, Islam, or anything else is thus factually incorrect. It is also politically defeatist, attributing a quality of inevitability that belies the experience of political change in other parts of the world.

“Promoting Women’s Rights Is Crucial for Democratic Change”

False. This myth, a favorite of women’s organizations and Western governments, reflects the combination of correct observation and false logic. No country can be considered fully democratic if a part of its population (in some cases, the majority) is discriminated against and denied equal rights. But efforts to change the status quo by promoting women’s rights are premature. The main problem at present is that Arab presidents and kings have too much power, which they refuse to share with citizens and outside institutions. This stranglehold on power must be broken to make progress toward democracy. Greater equality for women does nothing to diminish the power of overly strong, authoritarian governments.

Arab leaders know this truth all too well. Many autocrats implement policies to improve women’s rights precisely to give themselves reformist credentials and score points with Western governments, media outlets, and nongovernmental organizations. These efforts, however, often amount to a trick of smoke and mirrors designed to disguise the governments’ refusal to cede any real power. In the last few years, several Arab states have appointed women to high positions and hurriedly implemented or proposed reforms concerning marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other personal status issues. These are welcome steps, but they do not address the core issue of promoting democracy: breaking the authoritarian pattern of Arab politics.

“Arab Democrats Are the Key to Reform”

Paradoxically, no. All Arab countries boast a small number of Westernized liberals who advocate respect for human rights, freedom of thought and speech, and democratic change. But democratic transformation requires more than the ideological commitment of a few individuals. In Western societies, a small democratic cadre sufficed in the distant past, when political
participation was the preserve of public-minded intellectual elites and wealthy property owners. But the Arab world of today is not the United States or Europe of the 18th century. The political elite faces a growing challenge by Islamist movements, which are developing a popular support base. As a result, democratic transformation also requires broad-based political parties and movements capable of transforming abstract democratic ideals into concrete programs that resonate with a public whose main concern is survival.

Arab democrats have so far shown little capacity—and less inclination—to translate abstract ideas into programs with mass appeal. Because they talk to Western organizations and each other more than to their fellow citizens, opposition political parties with a liberal agenda find themselves unable to build broad constituencies. This failure leaves the field open to government parties, which can build a following on the basis of patronage, and to Islamist parties, which build their following in the best tradition of mass parties, with a mixture of ideological fervor and grassroots social services.

Government repression and, at times, co-optation have also undermined Arab democrats’ effectiveness. Some regimes—notably Saudi Arabia’s—move quickly to clamp down on any nascent liberal debate. Others are more tolerant, giving liberals some intellectual space to write and discuss issues openly, as long as their talk is not followed by action. Arab democrats in countries such as Egypt are not a persecuted group. Rather, they tend to be professionals comfortably ensconced in the upper-middle class. Therefore, they are hesitant to demand genuine reforms that might lead to a hard-line takeover and content to advocate democratization from the top.

Under such conditions, it would be a serious mistake for U.S. and European democracy advocates to focus on Arab democrats as the key to political change. These individuals will play a role if democracy becomes a reality. But during this period of transition, they have neither the inclination to push for reform nor the political clout to do so successfully.

“Middle East Democracy Is the Cure for Islamist Terrorism”

No. This view is rooted in a simplistic assumption: Stagnant, repressive Arab regimes create positive conditions for the growth of radical Islamist groups, which turn their sights on the United States because it embodies the liberal sociopolitical values that radical Islamists oppose. More democracy, therefore, equals less extremism.

History tells a different story. Modern militant Islam developed with the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in the 1920s, during the most democratic period in that country’s history. Radical political Islam gains followers not only among repressed Saudis but also among some Muslims in Western democracies, especially in Europe. The emergence of radical Islamist groups determined to wreak violence on the United States is thus not only the consequence of Arab autocracy. It is a complex phenomenon with diverse roots, which include U.S. sponsorship of the mujahideen in Afghanistan in the 1980s (which only empowered Islamist militants); the Saudi government’s promotion of radical Islamic educational programs worldwide; and anger at various U.S. policies, such as the country’s stance on the Arab-Israeli conflict and the basing of military forces in the region.

Moreover, democracy is not a cure-all for terrorism. Like it or not, the most successful efforts to control radical Islamist political groups have been antidemocratic, repressive campaigns, such as those waged in Tunisia, Egypt, and Algeria in the 1990s. The notion that Arab governments would necessarily be more effective in fighting extremists is wishful thinking, no matter how valuable democratization might be for other reasons.
The experience of countries in different regions makes clear that terrorist groups can operate for sustained periods even in successful democracies, whether it is the Irish Republican Army in Britain or the ETA (Basque separatists) in Spain. The ETA gained strength during the first two decades of Spain’s democratization process, flourishing more than it had under the dictatorship of Gen. Francisco Franco. In fragile democratic states—as new Arab democracies would likely be for years—radical groups committed to violence can do even more harm, often for long periods, as evidenced by the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines, or the Maoist rebels in Nepal.

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