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Why is Democracy Elusive in the Middle East?

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In the aftermath of 9/11, discussions about counter-terrorism quickly veered into broader concerns about the absence of democracy in the Middle East as a "root cause" of terrorist movements. The Bush Administration made "democratizing" the region by force one of the key justifications for pre-emptive war in Iraq, despite the fact that most regional analysts argued that a prolonged American occupation of Iraq would reduce prospects for democracy.

This has indeed been the case. The war in Iraq now has regional repercussions that rival those of the Israeli-Palestinian-Arab conflict. For instance, Iraqis now constitute the second largest refugee population in the Middle East after the Palestinians. Over two million Iraqis, as well as many Palestinian refugees who settled in Iraq, have fled to Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt. These countries, with scarce resources, are tightening controls on refugees, who are leaving Iraq at an estimated rate of several thousand per day. Over two million Iraqis are internally displaced and unable to leave.[1]

In addition, U.S. pressure on such different regimes as Egypt and Saudi Arabia to pursue political reforms has evaporated as the Iraqi situation deteriorates. These governments have employed new restrictive laws and simple coercion to limit the activities of both secular and Islamist opponents. As chaos spreads in Iraq, the growing clout of Iran and the U.S.'s disengagement from the Arab-Israeli peace process have further destabilized the region.

In this context, official American rhetoric about promoting democracy comes across to most Middle Easterners as insincere at best and callous at worst, even though many in the Middle East openly admire the American people and American democratic institutions. Public opinion polls consistently show that significant majorities of Middle Easterners favor democratic government for their own countries.

A Comparative Politics Approach

So why, the recent and tragic developments aside, has democratization thus far eluded the region? Scholars of comparative politics sometimes approach the problem of democratization by breaking it down into more bounded questions and seeking common patterns across a range of cases. How do authoritarian regimes come to power and manage to stay there? What roles do civil society or external actors play in challenging authoritarian rule?

In answering such questions, we find that we can explain the scarcity of democracy in the Middle East without resorting to the idea that the Middle East is somehow inherently resistant to democracy. It is misleading, in my view, to argue that Arab political culture or Islam are unchanging or inherently undemocratic. Instead, if we look at both past and present trends, we find long-standing patterns of external intervention, weak parliaments and strong executives, and a variety of popular movements that have advocated more representative, accountable government.

Colonial Rule and Weak Democratic Institutions

The Middle East has been subject to unusually significant levels of external intervention. The central political drama of the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century in the Middle East was the emergence of movements for "constitutionalism" and against external rule. Reformers in the Ottoman Empire, North Africa, and Iran wanted to create popularly elected parliaments and adopt a written constitution to constrain the power of the ruler. Despite these desires, from the early 1800's until the 1950's, the region was the object of virtually continuous attempts at direct and indirect control by European powers. At different times, the British controlled Egypt, Sudan, Iraq, and Palestine; the French ruled with varying degrees of success in Lebanon, Syria, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria; the Italians decimated much of the domestic population of Libya, and the

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[1] For more information on the Iraqi refugee crisis, see reports by Human Rights Watch (www.hrw.org) and the International Crisis Group (www.icg.org).

Russians and British played for influence in Iran—much as they did further a field in Central Asia.

External powers faced periodic, popular revolts against the colonial presence, and all used violence and co-optation of local elites to sustain their position. They also established monarchies or presidential systems with deliberately weak parliaments, as was the case in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Sudan, and Egypt. Colonial powers and local rulers alike sought to limit the effectiveness and scope of parliamentary authority.

In addition, early Middle Eastern states were poor. Great differences in wealth and power divided society into relatively small numbers of elites and much greater numbers of poorer people. These popular classes increasingly joined in formal political life in the 1930's and 1940's through the creation of mass-based movements that called for an end to colonial rule and for more authentic and representative governments. Middle Easterners marched in the streets, organized political parties of all sorts, voted in elections where given the chance, and waged insurgencies when no political outlets emerged. Many were imprisoned, executed, and exiled in the process.

Colonial advisers and local rulers, concerned with controlling vast rural hinterlands and unruly cities, strengthened the armed forces and established new internal security forces. These came to occupy a privileged place within national economies and political life. In Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the small Gulf states, monarchs succeeded in creating family dynasties despite recurrent opposition. Elsewhere, in Egypt, Algeria, Iraq, Syria, and Tunisia, cliques of army officers eventually overthrew the colonial orders, perceived by most citizens as corrupt, ineffectual, and elitist.

The Growth of the State

Many of these army officers were populist—that is, they appealed to vast numbers of 'citizens' who had seemingly gained little under weak parliamentary governments. They rapidly expanded central state bureaucracies to consolidate control and enact ambitious plans for state-led development. They centralized the apparatus of the state in the capital city and around the institution of the president or monarch himself. Many leaders also cultivated support among the poorer segments of society by undertaking programs of land redistribution, expanding educational opportunities, and creating jobs in the growing public bureaucracies.

Some emerging Middle Eastern states could draw on revenues from oil and foreign military aid to consolidate their political systems. In Iran, Saudi Arabia, and small states of the Gulf, the nationalization of oil companies channeled increasingly large sums of money directly into the coffers of incumbent governments and families. (Nationalization of oil production was widely popular, as previously the vast majority of oil profits went to a cartel of foreign multinationals). Other countries, such as Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and Iran, were able to maneuver throughout the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union to obtain significant influxes of military hardware and economic aid, disproportionate to the size of their economies or their populations. The U.S. continues to arm Saudi Arabia, the small Gulf states, Israel, and Egypt by arranging for billions in subsidized loans that, in most cases, must be used to purchase U.S. military equipment.

Downsizing the State, Manipulating Politics

Over the last few decades, authoritarian rulers have faced greater challenges in maintaining their monopolies over political power. Since the 1970's, states have found they can no longer provide enough jobs, educational opportunities, and basic services to still rapidly increasing populations. Regimes both democratic and authoritarian have downsized and privatized. This process, still underway, is producing an increasingly diversified and vibrant private sector and increasing economic inequality as old forms of state support for the poor are withdrawn. Regimes have also experimented with new forms of political control, allowing small numbers of officially sanctioned parties to contest elections. Many of these elections are rigged or otherwise manipulated to ensure that the government's favored party maintains majorities in parliament and in other institutions such as professional associations and clubs.

The Islamist Trend

Some of the most successful movements in contesting even rigged elections, have been groups and organizations that define themselves as part of a broader Islamic resurgence. Islamist movements and networks have benefited from the failures of state elites to provide basic services, address corruption, and safeguard human rights. Sa'ad Eddin Ibrahim, a respected academic and secular democratic activist in Egypt who was recently released after several years in Egyptian jails, echoed the consensus of many analysts within the region when he

wrote recently that "mainstream Islamists with broad social support, developed civic dispositions, and services to provide are the most likely actors in building a new Middle East. Whether we like it or not, these are the facts."[2]

At the end of the Cold War, hopes that the Middle East would finally be released from the machinations of great powers interested in oil and strategic real estate were short-lived. As suggested at the beginning, the U.S. "war on terror" has been counterproductive thus far for democratization prospects in the region. But conditions in the region are in flux. On a recent trip to Cairo, I found many Egyptians outspoken and frank about the incompetence of the ruling party and the system of presidential patronage that underpins it. Some feel that change is inevitable. A recent college graduate, active in the Kifaya (Enough!) movement, told me that "Democracy is only a matter of time. The only questions are when and at what price. But it will happen."

What Can the U.S. Do?

What could the U.S. do to help promote rather than hinder democratization in the Middle East? The United States could work diligently to solve regional and civil conflicts, but only by recognizing the legitimacy of diverse interests and viewpoints, a task that has eluded several recent administrations. The United States could condition its military and economic aid on substantive political reforms and regional conflict-problem solving, something that the U.S. has thus far been unwilling to do except in token and small-scale ways.

As for Iraq, we face dismal options from a misguided intervention. The U.S. could signal its recognition of the costs to both Iraqis and the region by addressing the mounting humanitarian crisis in concrete and visible ways. For instance, on the refugee question alone, the U.S. could dramatically increase its assistance to such organizations as the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and accept large numbers of Iraqi refugees rather than the token hundreds that have so far been admitted.

Interested in learning more?

At UNH:
- Courses on the Middle East and/or Islam are taught by Alasdair Drysdale (Geography), Ethel Sara Wolper (History) and myself (Political Science), among others.

- Arabic is currently being offered through the Languages, Literatures, and Cultures Department.

On the Internet:
- For up-to-date analysis of developments based on research in the field, check out the Middle East Research and Information Project (www.merip.org) and the periodic reports by the International Crisis Group (www.icg.org).

- For information on U.S. foreign policy and foreign aid, check out the bipartisan reports by the Congressional Research Service. Although supposedly restricted to members of Congress, most find their way online. The reference desk at Diamond Library can also help locate them.

- There are many English-language newspapers and news outlets from the Middle East on the web. Here are some of the major ones. (I am not endorsing any of the content.)

  Al Ahram Weekly (Egypt, English), www.weekly.ahram.org.eg

  Al Jazeera, English edition, english.aljazeera.net

  Arab News (Saudi Arabia, English), www.arabnews.com

  The Daily Star (Egypt edition, English), www.dailystaregypt.com

  The Daily Star (Lebanon, English), www.dailystar.com.lb

  Haaretz (Israel, English), www.haaretzdaily.com

- **Blogs:** Blogging is taking off and authoritarian governments take it seriously. Egypt, for instance, recently imprisoned several young bloggers on charges of "defaming the state." These can be found through major search engines.

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[2] Quoted in "Democratizing the Middle East?" *Occasional Paper No. 2*, The Fares Center for Eastern Mediterranean Studies, Tufts University. Report of a conference held at Tufts University, Medford/Somerville, MA, January 26–27, 2006.