

A Delicate Task: The Democratization Challenge in the Middle East

The United States has a vital supporting role to play in the drama of Middle Eastern democratization, but to play that role well American policymakers will need to resist the temptation to act like producers or directors. If they choose the supporting role, Americans can help regional actors reach new heights of artistic expression. If they choose the role of producer or director, however, Americans will encounter resistance from the actors' union. At best, their efforts to orchestrate and choreograph change will be met with accusations of paternalism; at worst, they will be regarded as neo-colonial.

To skillfully play the supporting role, America needs a different model of engagement with the Middle East, based on altogether new guiding principles. These guiding principles must include a more democratic theory of democracy that acknowledges the cultural bases of transformative politics.

Democracy is not a western product; it is rather a global process of organizing political needs on an equal basis that must be deeply rooted in the dreams and hopes of the great majority of a nation to flourish. Western scholars tend to conflate the American liberal form of democracy with the substance of democracy. The substance of democracy is a human society that has a sense of common goals, a sense of community, a process of participation in decision-making, and protective safeguards for dissenters. The form of democracy, on the other hand, is always

cast in the mold of the culture of a people. The practice of democracy is always less tidy than its definition, because it is more dynamic than its formal description and prescription.

There is no fundamental incompatibility between Islam and democracy. The lack of democracy in the Middle East is due more to a lack of preparation for it than to a lack of religious and cultural foundations. In addition to social functions, Islam serves a practical role in politics by offering recourse to a transcendental order to which rulers can be held accountable. The oppressed can defend their rights by appealing to religious standards. Islam offers a vocabulary of resistance to corruption and repression, and a vocabulary of hope for the cultural future.

It is particularly self-defeating to exclude Islamic extremists if they are willing to participate in democratic politics. The central issue raised by extremist movements – the failure of development in the region – is legitimate. By repressing extremist voices, existing elites force the Islamic impulse into narrower channels characterized by violence. Instead, the United States should encourage Middle Eastern governments to create the space necessary to dialogue with extremists and engage their core concerns and grievances. What is required is an Arab alternative that is neither a superficial compromise nor a schizophrenic reaction, but rather a response based on Islamic values which reflects the historical development of Islam and responds to the challenge of contemporary life

The United States can facilitate democratization by sponsoring and engaging in dialogues that nurture a renewed understanding of individuality in community. Rather than an American monologue, the United States can begin by asking key questions that empower Middle

Easterners to define what they want – to flesh out the answer to the question: “What does democracy look like for us, in form as well as substance?” Education and the media will play a critical role in the transition process. Both are necessary for the indigenous development of democracy.

Islamic social institutions are more dynamic and variegated than is widely recognized, and provide the basis for genuine participation at the social and political level. It is the Muslim community itself that must discover how this integration can apply to modern living, and in the process discover original ways of implementing Islamic precepts in changing social conditions. Muslims have the right to participate in the unfolding and direction of their community, while creating their own values and terms within the enduring context of Islam. Democracy is not built upon a particular variety of electoral institutions, but upon genuine participation. In this regard there are democratic precepts in Islam, as there are in other religions, to include both the preservation and development of the community, and social justice and consultative mechanisms

Democracy cannot be installed by a military coup any more than by a so-called “White Revolution” from the top. Democratic behavior is a learned behavior, and democracy can be learned only by practice. While repressive regimes can be imposed by subversion, democracy cannot be successfully implanted from the outside, and certainly not by subversive means: it is an indigenous process rooted in the active participation of a broad spectrum of citizens in the political process. On many occasions, the United States has experienced false starts in building democracies, displaying timidity and an absence of vision. .

Today, the United States faces a delicate task: there is a need for a new beginning in the Arab World. Here is an opportunity for the United States to demonstrate its commitment to universal democratic ideals by engaging in a substantive dialogue with a population traumatized by years of brutal political oppression and humiliated by the shortsighted policies of great powers. If dialogue about democracy can begin to extend beyond elites, we will witness not only a transformation in historical relationships and understandings, but also the emergence of true leadership that thrives by the flourishing of others. It would be a beautiful production, in which the people of the Middle East could play the starring roles.

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I've been thinking a bit about the line in your democracy editorial about traditional Islamic social institutions, which you say are "more variegated than is generally recognized."

I think this is a good point, but an example or two is needed to make it convincing to an American audience. Perhaps a point or two could be made that a traditional leader (sheikh) was not a dictator, and made decisions through a process of consultation (shurah) and informal meetings (majlis). Perhaps there are other good examples as well, like the open forums in which a sultan or emir would hear grievances about injustice (I forget the exact word), and the institutions like the mukhtar (village leader), which could only function properly through constant negotiation of relationships. In the modern Middle

East, shurah and the majlis have evolved into parliament-style institutions and are popularly understood to be bases for democracy in Islam.

People need to know about the local idioms and institutions through which social and political relations are practiced.