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1 **The Struggle over Democracy in the Middle East**
Regional politics and external policies
Edited by Nathan J. Brown and Emad El-Din Shahin

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Edited By
Nathan J. Brown and Emad El-Din Shahin

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1 Introduction

Nathan J. Brown and Emad El-Din Shahin

This book is an effort to engage academics and activists interested in the Middle East with the prospects for democracy in the region. All of the contributors are familiar not only with the politics of the Middle East but also with various social science approaches to issues of democracy and democratization. The only authors not from the region itself are those who write on the policies of the United States and Europe.

A bleak landscape for democrats?

For many area experts, the state of democratic transformation in the Middle East region, particularly the Arab world, does not look promising. Most countries in the region are faced with obstinate domestic and external obstacles that make democracy seem like a distant dream. The peoples of the Middle East live under autocratic and authoritarian systems; few would question the desirability of the political systems becoming viable and functioning democracies. But paths of transition are far from obvious, and the dedication of key actors to the practical realities of democracy is questionable at best. Even the recent US and European Union (EU) drive to promote democracy has been blunted by the harsh and all too familiar press of security concerns and interests.

To many, therefore, the future of democracy in the region is bleak. Some might rightly reach this conclusion on the basis of persistent domestic structural obstacles, while it may appear to others that the future of democratic transformation (or any political change) in the region will always be predicated on the interest and security concerns of the external actors. After all, the Middle East is not Eastern Europe where Western security interests and democratic transition seemed to coincide for a decade.

When compared with countries in other regions, such as Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Africa, which had limited prior experience of democracy yet still managed to achieve some form of democratic transition, the countries of the Middle East stand out for the small and limited extent of change. Unlike those other areas, where political leaders lost their ability to manage events, autocratic regimes in the Middle East are in control of the process of

political change. And most still enjoy the support and backing of the Western powers. Thus, when apparently democratizing changes occur, they deliver far less than they promise: elections are held on a regular basis but are not clean, pluralistic, or competitive; the legal and institutional structures associated with the rule of law are elaborate and often well established but restrictive and under executive domination; the scope of political and social association has been broadened but remains controlled and ineffective. Whenever the region seems to be taking a step forward toward transformation, countervailing strategies by nimble leaders and regimes seem to set the process several steps backwards.

Signs of hope?

There is thus much basis for despair, but a more thorough look at the state of the process of democratization in the region might still give some hope.

On the intellectual level, there are indications that democratic pressures are more deeply rooted than previously realized and reflect genuine local conditions more than external pressures. The debate over democracy is decades old. The Arab defeat in 1967 generated vigorous debates among Arab intellectuals about the need for democracy, citizenship rights, constitutional legitimacy, popular participation, government accountability, and the promotion of democratic values. Most of this debate remained confined to a small circle of intellectual elites and did not penetrate the grassroots levels until recently.

But that may be changing. Looking at the societal level, and bearing in mind that democratization is a gradual process, one can safely reach the conclusion that democracy is increasingly gaining roots and that the societies of the region are gradually acquiring experiences with democratic practices and institutions. That is clearly different from claiming that democracy is becoming a primary value for the people of the region. Other issues are perhaps far more important than democracy for most regional residents. This is, of course, true for those outside of the region as well, but in the Middle East, so many other issues seem especially pressing: military threats to Arab security and sovereignty; the daily struggle for social and economic survival; and the global threats to culture and identity. That might partially explain why people in the region are readily willing to protest against the Israeli and US military actions in the region and/or against cartoons defaming the prophet of Islam, while sporadically and reluctantly taking to the street to demand more freedoms. But even here, one can note a stronger social basis for democratic change: many residents of the region have come to see the battle for justice, security, survival, and identity as linked rather than opposed to the battle for democratic change.

At the level of the process, political opening and liberalization started in the region long before September 11, 2001, even before the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Egypt's political liberalization started only one year after the collapse of Franco's regime and Spain's transition to democracy. Tunisia

allowed for some sort of pluralism in 1974, and moved from a single party to a multiparty system in 1981. Algeria's "perestroika" took place in 1989, the same year that marked the end of the communist regime in the Soviet Union and earlier than many East European countries. King Hussein of Jordan scrapped martial law in 1989 and legalized political parties in 1992. In 1989 and 1993, Jordan witnessed fairly free legislative elections. Contrary to the wide generalizations that view the Arab regimes as immune to changes, in fact, compared with two or three decades ago, the Arab regimes have been transforming in response to increasing pressures for political liberalization.

And it must be noted that democratic institutions and processes do exist in the Middle East, however frequently they are robbed of their vitality. Elections have been taking place in the Middle East region on a frequent and regular basis. According to Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Elections have become a common feature of the political landscape of the Middle East and North Africa."[1] Within a decade (1989–99), eighty elections at the local, municipal, provincial, and national levels have taken place. Each year, one type of election was held in one or more countries in the region. Voter turnout has remarkably been very high ranging from 69 percent to almost 90 percent.[2] This does not necessarily mean that the region is really democratizing. In the Arab world, none of these elections produced major policy shifts or transformations of the system. (And since that period, only the Palestinian parliamentary elections of 2006 saw an incumbent party defeated.) In addition, it is difficult to characterize these elections as free and transparent. Most were carefully structured, and the election outcome was easily predicted. The elections were used to enhance the eroding legitimacy of Arab regimes and reinforce their claims of adhering to legal procedures and democratic practices. On the positive side, they may indicate in some cases that the people of the region are acquiring an experience and a culture of electoral practices that could be useful in any future democratic transformation.

While the motivations of leaders in allowing change can (and should) be questioned, the region has recently experienced some meaningful structural reforms, even in unlikely countries. In 1992, following the First Gulf War, Saudi Arabia introduced a series of reforms aimed at streamlining its system of government. It introduced the Basic Law of Government (a kind of constitution); established an *appointed* Consultative Council; and reorganized the Kingdom's provincial governance. More recently, municipal elections were held in 2005 (half the members of the local councils were directly elected). Official promises have been made to allow for Saudi women's participation in the next elections. If these promises are kept, they could certainly generate societal changes. Earlier in 2003, Saudi Arabia allowed for a structured National Dialogue to debate the prospects of reform, direct elections to an association of Saudi journalists, and the establishment of a semi-independent National Association for Human Rights in 2004. After intense debates and a long wait (since 1975), Kuwaiti women were finally granted the right to participate in the political process as voters and candidates, beginning with the

2006 parliamentary elections. For the first time in that country's history, a woman assumed a cabinet position. Over the past few years, Bahrain has embarked on a series of significant political reforms and structural changes that included the release of political prisoners, scrapping the emergency laws and state security courts, granting women the right to vote and to stand as candidates in the national elections, holding legislative elections in 2002 and again in 2006 by universal suffrage (restoring parliamentary life after a gap of nearly three decades). In 2002, six women were appointed to the Upper House, the *Shura* Council; and two years later, the first female minister joined the cabinet. In Qatar, voters voted for a constitution in 2003 that allowed for the establishment of a forty-five member parliament, two thirds of which is directly elected. The constitution also expanded the margin of political and civil rights and public freedoms as it guaranteed the freedom of association (although not the formation of political parties) and the freedom of expression. Other countries in the region with relatively long experience in liberalization, such Algeria, Egypt, and Morocco, introduced some reforms to their existing laws—electoral, press, party formation, and even constitutional amendments—to allow for some form of national reconciliation, more competitive elections, more political pluralism, and/or more freedom of expression. Across the Middle East, civil society organizations, particularly the advocacy oriented, emerged and gradually began to acquire some skills and address various reform demands.

A more realistic assessment

None of these reforms should be taken to indicate that there is a clear or linear movement toward democratization. Most of these steps are not only limited in effect but also double edged: the restoration of the Bahraini parliament, for instance, came with the creation of an appointed upper house designed to act as a check on the restored democratic body. And gerrymandering prevented the parliament from reflecting the true distribution of popularity among various political forces.

One of the most fundamental limitations of the wave of political reforms is closely related to the motivation behind them. All are top-down efforts undertaken to enhance the grip of faltering authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes on power. Most of these reforms are perceived to have been promoted by internal instability or external pressure. The rulers reacting to such pressures are seeking to parry off demands for future change; none have yet accepted democracy as a primary value. These reforms have been selectively designed to absorb domestic popular dissatisfaction, as well as to ease an increasing Western anxiety over their vital interests in the region. The driving force behind them is to address the need that most of these regimes feel to salvage their eroding legitimacy, prolong their authority, and continue to secure the support of outside actors. Once these regimes feel that the pressure has eased, they revert to their old repressive practices (witness the de-liberalization in

Jordan 2001, or in Egypt following the parliamentary elections in late 2005). The reforms are occurring in the absence of any clear vision of democracy as a concept and the instruments that would lead to its fulfillment. Incumbents seek a democratic transformation that falls short of the possibility of power transfer, fully accountable government, true representation, and the presence of effective political parties. Even those pressuring for reform often focus their demands on the transfer of power, without sufficiently considering the structural and institutional requisites that could make an effective democratic transformation and consolidation of democracy possible. There are growing demands for change and reform, but understanding of the mechanism to achieve them is still underdeveloped.

The seeming wave of reforms can be criticized on another basis as well: they may bring changes but, taken as a whole, they certainly do not amount to democratization and indeed barely affect the existing imbalances that continue to characterize the distribution of power among branches of the state and between state and society. There is a remarkable disparity between the powers of the executive and the legislature, which is almost controlled by the former. The heads of the executive in monarchical or republican systems alike enjoy extensive formal powers that range from vetoing their parliaments, appointing their cabinets, declaring states of emergency, suspending political life, or ruling by decree. And their informal powers—unwritten but very real rules by which they dominate the party system, the parliament, and sometimes the judiciary—augment their already formidable positions.

Thus, the legislative and monitoring powers of parliaments in the region are remarkably weak. This weakness precludes the possibility for the evolution of the necessary legal and constitutional frameworks that can effectively push the process of democratic transformation further. The existing parliaments usually succeed in passing laws that circumvent and outmaneuver the demands for reforms. Most parliaments in the region are not representative. They are often appointed rather than elected bodies. Sometimes their appointment comes in the formal sense, with some or all deputies appointed by the head of the state. More often, however, membership is formally elected but dominated by rigged electoral procedures and by a state party through a manipulated electoral system. Popular political actors are often excluded (or, in more recent years, included but marginalized), a phenomenon that adversely reflects on the effectiveness of the political life and the opposition parties.

One major consequence of this situation is that pro-reform actors remain unable to pass laws that promote a genuine democratic transformation. The continuous state of exclusion and marginalization also forces the opposition parties to atrophy and generates a state of apathy on the part of large segments of the population, often manifest by a conspicuously low voter turnout and widespread indifference to political life. In sum, the transformation that is currently taking place and the way it is being engineered should not conceal the persisting authoritarian practices, absence of adequate channels of participation, and low capacity of the opposition. Thus, the changes that have

taken place have not limited the powers of the ruling elite or allowed for some form of real power sharing. At best, they open some limited political space; at worst, they merely mask the authoritarian nature of the regime and create a superficial atmosphere of change that allows for a further manipulation of the political process through cunning cooptation, containment, and/or repression.

One can still argue that, as cosmetic and manipulated these reforms may seem, they will certainly have a residual and incremental effect on the Middle Eastern society's capacity and experience with democratization. Several recent developments clearly reflect some positive signs. First, there is a growing realization on the part of the regimes that it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain the status quo through the application of systematic violence and brutal force alone. Second, many Middle Eastern societies are increasingly willing and able to articulate public demands for reform and more political and social rights. The region has experienced an upsurge in demonstrations and public protests expressing such demands in the past few years. Third, despite the continued weakness of civil society, several pro-reform grassroots movements and groups have been formed, crystallizing at different times some form of an agreement over a list of political demands. Many have broken the fear barriers and put the regime and its leading members (the untouchable symbols) under close scrutiny. Finally, the states in the region have adopted a neoliberal economic model in an attempt to reform their economic performance. This model, which is based on liberalization and private initiative, should eventually reduce the state control and enhance the economic and political capacity of the society. Further, as the implementation of this model will produce losers, primarily the salaried middle classes and the lower classes, the regimes have to accompany the process with political openings to absorb these discontented groups.

The great challenge now for the pro-reform actors in the region lies in developing the necessary instruments to exploit the openings, limited though they are, that have occurred. And they cannot do so without casting democratic values and practices in terms that resonate with the region's particular history, culture, and socio-political realities. Such a process might be facilitated by several efforts: the development of an informal national consensus or even a more formal accord that guides present and future political practices; coalition building; preparing the necessary constitutional and legal frameworks for a transitional phase; insisting on independent monitoring of national elections; and neutralizing the external support for the authoritarian regimes in the region.

This volume

In this volume, we have asked a variety of scholars and activists in the region to examine the prospects for democracy from a variety of angles. But we have also asked external analysts to review and analyze the role of external actors who appear to have embraced the cause of Middle Eastern democratization

so enthusiastically. We begin with those externally focused essays. Nathan J. Brown and Amy Hawthorne examine the evolution of American policy, emphasizing the evolutionary nature of American policy and its growing embrace of democratization. They argue that the Bush democratization agenda was less of a departure than it appeared: while it led to a brief but intense period of soaring reform rhetoric, it never found the policy tools to realize the vision and ultimately beat a retreat under intense pressures. While American support for democratization programs did not disappear, the effort reverted to the collection of modest, politically safe, and opportunistic efforts that characterized American democratization efforts in the region since their beginning in the 1990s. Richard Youngs explores European policy, focusing on the relationship between security and democratization. His frank discussion of the facile assumptions underlying the claimed coincidence of democratic values and security interests provides a sobering reminder of the quandaries faced by external actors. Youngs does not advocate a reversion to a cynical realism that abandons any claim of linkage between regional political reform and Western security interests. But he does observe that the two alternative approaches that have emerged in recent years—working for security through promoting reform and through ignoring it—rest uneasily with each other. No middle path has been found in which reform has become one of a set of tools for promoting Western security. Instead, in a sense, we have the worst of both worlds—much talk about political reform but little sustained commitment to it. The result is likely to be only deepening political cynicism among Western policy makers and regional publics. Youngs, Brown, and Hawthorne all describe external actors who base their policy on overlooking some difficult choices and unresolved contradictions.

Two scholars from the region also give a general overview of Middle East democratization efforts. Shlomo Avineri compares the Middle Eastern experience with that of other regions, with a special focus on the transitions in the former Soviet bloc. Avineri rejects a narrow cultural determinism, but his essay still points to some severe difficulties, such as lack of a usable democratic past; the weakness of civil society; and the weakness of democratic political culture. Avineri is just short of grim about regional realities, but he clearly views the challenges as enormous and believes that those who wish for reform in the region have been dealt a difficult hand indeed. He does find some kind words for external efforts but also cautions about excessive expectations. The clear conclusion is that democracy is a long and difficult historical process and much of the region is only—and at best—beginning that journey. Walid Kazziha starts from a very different point—one which rejects some of the cultural and historical claims of Avineri—but ultimately comes to similar conclusions about the outlook for democracy. He turns the focus to internal aspects of the struggle for democracy in the Arab world. While aware of external interest, Kazziha finds Western discussions strangely disconnected from those in the region. He does find that interest in democracy has a long history among intellectuals and therefore argues that the weakness of

democracy is far less on the intellectual and much more on the practical level: a democratic environment will only emerge when genuine political constituencies appear on the scene and pave the way for the emergence of a vibrant political life in Arab societies. Until that time, talk about democracy will remain only talk.

In another essay focusing on the region as a whole, Azza Karam insists on questioning sharp divisions that are often taken to dominate politics in the region. She explores the main features of the debate on democracy occasioned by the rise of Islamist movements, examining Islamist stances toward democracy, the nature of their practices, and the reasons for and implications of their electoral appeal.

She shows how Islamist movements have arisen both because of the decline of secular movements and because of "blowback" from efforts by governments to suppress other forms of dissent or to use them for other purposes. Extremists in the region and in the West pursue the "clash of civilizations" and seem to wish for one, but there is far more common ground than the extremists want to see emerge.

The final section of the volume consists of a series of case studies: Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. For Egypt, Emad El-Din Shahin assesses the political developments that Egypt has experienced over the past few years and the prospects for a democratic transformation. He analyzes the changes, or calculated reforms, that the regime has introduced to the system as a way to contain a growing popular discontent and outside pressure. He also investigates the impact of these changes on the political dynamics and major actors within Egyptian society. Shahin sees these changes to have produced positive political outcomes. However, they fall short of placing Egypt on a genuine democratic transformation.

Shadi Hamid turns our attention from a presidential republic to the Jordanian monarchy, testing the argument—surprisingly commonplace in recent years—that Arab monarchies are friendlier to democratization than republics. He thus examines the Jordanian experience in comparison with the republican Egyptian counterexample. He concludes that monarchies in the region have proven to be effective initiators of reform but that such efforts fall prey to clear structural and institutional limits.

In his essay, Bassel F. Salloukh poses the question of why democratic transition did not take place in Lebanon. Unlike the monarchies and the presidential republics, conditions in Lebanon would seem to be more favorable for democracy, but Salloukh demonstrates how sectarianism, regional factors, and external actors (including the US) have inhibited democratic development. Democratic structures and mechanisms have survived Lebanese confessionalism only by molding themselves completely to it.

Finally, Ersin Kalaycioglu examines the history of republican Turkey, focusing on the two poles of secularism and Islamism, or what he terms competing "positivist" and "Islamic revivalist" positions. Examining public opinion polls, he shows that the sharp dichotomy between the religious and secular dimensions at the level of the political elite seems to break down—at least in part—at the level of popular preferences and practices. In a sense, the relationship between religion and public life becomes less clear the closer one is to the ground. In some ways, Kalaycioglu is one of the volume's more sanguine authors. He is certainly not unaware of how complicated the issues are—noting at one point the odd feature of the wife of the country's current president earlier having pursued a lawsuit on a core emotional issue (women's head covering) against the government even while her husband sat as prime minister. Kalaycioglu views the struggle over Turkish culture and identity—as intractable as it seems—as increasingly amenable to democratic politics. Instead of suppressing the struggle or imposing a specific solution, the current incarnation of the Turkish republic is uneasily managing it through democratic structures and procedures. Ironically, it may be elections themselves (the very strong showing by the currently governing AKP party) that lead to an end to careful negotiation of Turkey's differences.

The essays in this volume thus examine a wide variety of experiences from a number of different perspectives. Despite this apparent cacophony, some strong areas of consensus emerge. We will turn our attention to those in the conclusion.

Notes

1 Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Is the Middle East Democratizing?" *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (1999): 199.
2 Ibid.: 204.

political Islam and violence in Turkey, see also Menderes Çınar and Burhanettin Duran (2008) "The Specific Evolution of Contemporary Political Islam in Turkey and its 'Difference'" in Umit Cizre, ed., *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of the Justice and Development Party*. London and New York: Routledge: 17–40.
26 Ali Carkoglu ve Binnaz Toprak, *Türkiye'de Din, Toplum ve Siyaset*, op. cit.: 17.
27 Ibid.
28 Binnaz Toprak (2005) "Islam and Democracy in Turkey," *Turkish Studies* 6(2), June: 170.
29 For an analysis of "*türban and tesettür*" in Turkish politics, see Ersin Kalaycioglu (2005) "The Mystery of the *Türban*: Participation or Revolt?" *Turkish Studies* 6(2), June: 233–51.
30 The Turkish press reported that Foreign Minister Ali Babacan argued in a speech he delivered at the European Parliament on May 28, 2008 that it is the Muslim majority who fail to live according to their religious beliefs (see *Hurriyet* daily of May 29, 2008 or http://arama.hurriyet.com.tr/arsivnews.aspx?id=9045167).
31 On April 23, 2006, the speaker of the Grand National Assembly, Mr. Bulent Arinç, argued that the republican principle of laicism be re-interpreted according to the needs and changes that have taken place in Turkish society. He further criticized that the current interpretation and implementation of laicism was non-democratic (see *Hurriyet* daily on May 24, 2006 or http://arama.hurriyet.com.tr/arsivnews.aspx?id=4302003).
32 Mrs. Hayrunnisa Gül dropped her case against Turkey about a year after her husband became the foreign minister, although not while he served briefly as the prime minister between November 2002 and March 2003. It looked as if the wife of the Turkish prime minister and eventually the foreign minister was suing the very government for violating her rights, while her husband was heading the bureaucracy that was to defend the republic at the ECHR. Eventually, she withdrew her case. The Turkish media and press reported at the time that the decision of Mrs. Gül occurred only after it became apparent to her that the ECHR was about to decide against other similar cases and uphold the decision of the Turkish constitutional court.
33 In the 2006 survey conducted by Ali Carkoglu and Ersin Kalaycioglu, 68 percent from a nationally representative sample of 1846 voting-age respondents declared that those women who don the *türban* or *tesettür* should be permitted to function as state employees.
34 Ersin Kalaycioglu (2005) "The Mystery of the *Türban*: Participation or Revolt?" *Turkish Studies* 6(2), June: 245–46.
35 For a more extensive analysis of the Justice and Development Party in Turkish politics, see Sabri Sayarı (2007) "Towards a New Turkish Party System?", *Turkish Studies* 8(2), June: 201–3; Ersin Kalaycioglu (2007) "Politics of Conservatism in Turkey," *Turkish Studies* 8(2), June: 239–41.
36 Ersin Kalaycioglu (2002) "The Motherland Party: The Challenge of Institutionalization in a Charismatic Leader Party," *Turkish Studies* 3(1), Spring: 41–61.
37 See Ali Çarkoğlu (2007) "The Nature of the Left–Right Self Placement in the Turkish Context," *Turkish Studies* 8(2), June: 256–69; Sabri Sayarı (2007) "Towards a New Turkish Party System?" op. cit.: 201–3 for additional arguments along these lines.
38 Kalaycioglu, *Turkish Dynamics* … , op. cit.: 72–73.
39 It was under the rule of the AKP that Prime Minister Erdogan and other party spokespersons argued that no regulation for the activities of any person, group, and association was possible for instruction to learn to read and recite the Holy Qur'an in Arabic. Therefore, it was under the reign of the AKP government that Qur'an courses have become relatively non-regulated, yet the IHLs are still under the jurisdiction and regulation of the Ministry of National Education.

11 Conclusion

Nathan J. Brown and Emad El-Din Shahin

It should seem odd to devote an entire volume to something that does not exist—or that can be found at best in very limited or ephemeral forms: democracy in the Middle East. Even exploring the reasons for its weakness in the Middle East would first appear to be an odd way of phrasing the question: why is it that democracy's absence needs to be explained? While democracy has come to have positive normative connotations in a vast array of societies, we cannot ignore its historical rarity as a political form. To inquire into the lack of democracy risks confusing the exception for the rule. Regional political realities make it hard to avoid cynicism when discussing the topic. And the press of recent events in the region seems to vindicate such cynicism.

But the interest in the subject remains strong. Many, including those who were asked by the editors to contribute to this volume, continue to analyze, write, speak, and organize on the subject. The terrain is unpromising to be sure, but we are not alone in exploring it. The promised rewards of democracy in the region are so great that it is difficult to avoid exploring democratic possibilities. And indeed, that is the primary reason for this volume and the motivating force behind many of the contributions. It is not simply the difficulty of the task or the possible rewards that fascinate us (although they do); it is also the degree to which the non-existent (or at best embryonic) democratic institutions and practices have drawn the attention and the energies of so many able people and powerful forces. It is precisely because so many activists and intellectuals in the region—and so many Western policy makers—have focused on democratic possibilities in the region that we are moved to examine it.

The contributors to this volume examine the topic from a wide variety of angles. And while they hardly speak in a single voice—given the diversity in their perspectives, professions, places of origin, and focus, that would be impossible and maybe even undesirable—their essays do allow us to give some coherent answers to a series of questions concerning democracy in the region. In this section, we try to answer four of the most pressing questions that external actors and regional activists have been asking in recent years. First, is the Middle East becoming more democratic? Second, why is democratic change so difficult in the region? Third, can outside powers push the

Middle East toward greater democracy? Finally, is religion a democratizing force or an inhibiting one?

1 Is the Middle East becoming democratic?

In a word, no. But change is occurring, although authors differ on its extent and meaning.

None of the contributors to this volume offers dissent from a bleak view of current realities. But, as we suggested in the introduction, political developments in the region are far more interesting than the simple (if accurate) negative view suggests. The Middle East has been associated for two generations with political turmoil, but in fact the political systems of the region have shown more stagnation than volatility. Yet for the past few years, the solid regimes of the region have found themselves challenged by a variety of voices calling for democratic reform.

The essays contained in this volume suggest that those challenges have had some limited effects. First, and most notably, there has been steadily growing interest in democracy in the region itself. Some authors—such as Walid Kazziha—remind us that the interest is not new and has hardly been sufficient to build democratic structures; others—such as Shlomo Avineri—are not impressed by the strength of democratic currents within the region. But the fact that it is an older idea does not refute the growth of the attraction in recent years, it merely shows that democratic ideas may be more deeply rooted. And while Avineri might be right to compare much of the region unfavorably in this regard with Eastern Europe, it may also be the case that the deep interest in democracy is obscured by the popularity of some other ideas as well that outsiders are unaccustomed to associate with democracy (such as deeply conservative social values and non-secular religio-political arrangements).

Second, the authors, for all their realism, uncover some interesting pockets of liberalization. None is naïve enough to see such pockets as the equivalent of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and indeed, the authors are all very realistic about the limitations of the openings that have taken place. Nevertheless, there are clear signs that gradual, albeit slow, changes are under way. This is manifested by a more critical press; a young generation of bloggers and internet users who disseminate a new culture of reform among peers; evolving advocacy non-governmental organizations (NGOs) increasingly acquiring experience and recognition; and protest–reform groups sharing some vision of reform and attempting to make up for the inadequacy of ineffective party life. Few authors deny the interest in democracy in the region, even though most hasten to point to the difficulties for those who seek to transform democratic dreams into reality.

2 Why is democratic change so difficult in the region?

Because any attempt to replace existing regimes or move them in a democratic direction encounters so many obstacles.

Despite the attraction to democracy and the examples of limited liberalization, there is no dissent in this volume from the view that the existing regimes are deeply entrenched and that tentative steps toward liberalization hardly amount to a move toward democratization. What are the obstacles to taking the interest and the limited openings and transforming them into genuine democratic change? Here, the authors present different (though not contradictory) views. Some, such as Shadi Hamid, focus on structures; others, such as Emad El-Din Shahin, focus on political agents, and yet others, such as Bassel F. Salloukh, focus on societies. None finds culture an insuperable obstacle, although some, such as Avineri, have doubts at an ideological level. Kazziha moves to political society and the weakness of any organized force able to pursue democratic change.

While they diverge, these explanations share a common feature: they seek to locate the difficulties in a general language rather than one specific to the historical and cultural particularities of the region. In short, the contributions are implicitly comparative (and some, such as Avineri's explicitly so): they seek to present their findings in ways that invite comparisons with other regions rather than in terms accessible only to those with a deep familiarity with the region.

Let us pull some of these strands together in an attempt to synthesize the contributions. What are the obstacles to democratic change in the Arab world?

- Non-democratic incumbent elites who do not believe in the values of democracy over the pace of the democratic process.
- Weak, fragmented, and passive civil society and legalized political parties that have demonstrated a low propensity for resistance and challenging the status quo.
- Very low political participation and public apathy.
- Lack of clarity and agreement over the mechanisms for effecting a democratic transformation.
- External actors who may be part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

And it is precisely to such external actors that we will now turn.

3 Can outside powers push the Middle East toward greater democracy?

Perhaps, but only in some limited ways. And they do not have an impressive record to date.

If many of the obstacles are embedded deeply in social and political structures, ideologies, and leaderships, then they would seem to be difficult to change. And that suggests that any external role to engineer social change, fundamental political change, and ideological change from the outside is necessarily limited and clumsy, and none of the authors here suggests any easy way to do it.

But what is more remarkable is that the contributions here suggest that the outside powers who have spoken about democratization so enthusiastically are uncertain in their own commitment. Salloukh goes so far as to imply that external involvement has damaged the cause of political reform. Whether external involvement is malignant or merely bumbling, none of the authors sees it as a factor that clearly supports democratization.

This skepticism does not come simply from those schooled in a long history of unconstructive external involvement in regional political matters. It also comes from an examination of the design of the policies themselves. Both of the essays that focus primarily on external actors—Brown and Hawthorne on the United States and Youngs on Europe—find that general support for democracy has not led to a clear set of priorities and policies. When policy makers effectively ignore tensions among their various goals, the result is less a set of policies than a collection of decisions that pull in different directions. It is no wonder that those in the region question the external commitment to political reform. In short, external actors are only half-committed to the cause and do not have a clear idea of how to pursue it even when they are sincere. External efforts at democratizing the region might have some positive effects, but they are likely to be marginal and localized—and thus far have probably justly earned the cynicism they provoke in the region.

Why do external actors find themselves far more able to talk about democracy than actually encourage it? Again, let us synthesize what we have learned:

- Whereas existing regimes in Eastern Europe were communists and anti-Western, in the Middle East, many have found ways to make themselves friendly to Western security interests (in cases where they have failed to do so—in Iran, Iraq, and Palestine most notably—there has been far less hesitancy by Western powers in calling for democratic change).
- In the East European context, the opposition was ideologically democratic and pro-Western; in the Middle Eastern context, it is Islamic and unpredictable from a Western standpoint.
- Western states could claim support and pressure from various domestic constituencies in working to topple communist/atheist East European regimes, whereas they are not under the same internal or international pressure to push for democracies that can bring Islamists to power.

Two of these three factors point immediately in the direction of the Islamists, leading to our next question.

4 Is religion a democratizing force or an inhibiting one?

We need to ask less about religion as an abstraction and more about political forces that base themselves on religion. And here we should abandon the search for absolutes.

Azza Karam shows the different aspects of the democracy debate among Islamists, their attempts to contextualize democracy, and views on specific democracy-related issues. They move beyond the dichotomous debate of Islam and democracy by addressing Islamist views about democracy and human rights, explaining the reasons why people vote for Islamists, and discussing the international implications of their ascendancy to power through the ballot box. Karam shows that Islamist movements fall on a spectrum, and many of them are pursuing ideas and principles very similar to those pursued by liberals.

Other authors do not explicitly address the issue of Islamists or do so at most in passing. But the logic of the contributions of many to this volume is clear: if democracy is weak because existing regimes can do what they like and social and political forces cannot organize constituencies to stop them, then those few independent and powerful social movements must be brought into the equation. Democracy in the region will not come over the dead body of Islamists. The biggest challenge for democratic change may be how to harness the social and political power of Islamists in ways that promote healthy political competition rather than repression and violence.

Where to?

We close with some advice. What should scholars, external actors, and Middle Eastern democrats do? Scholars need to broaden their vision; policy makers need to steady their nerves; and democrats need to turn to the people.

When discussing democratic transformation in the Middle East, one is struck by the lack of a systematic comparative approach to the process of transformation in the region. Admittedly, excellent work has been done on authoritarianism, liberalization, or Islam and democracy, but focusing either on the region as a whole or case by case. But comparison among cases is still missing. Also, studies comparing the region or some of its parts with countries in other regions are lacking. The region can offer insights and contribute to the study of democratic transformations and the transition literature, particularly with regard to issues such as the role of external actors in promoting or impeding democratization; the impact of foreign aid on the persistence of authoritarianism; the interconnection between rentier economies and the democracy deficit; the prospects of democratization in states with weak civil societies, marginal political parties, and ineffective parliaments; and the difficulty of promoting democracy in non-consensual societies. Comparisons with idealized versions of Western experiences can provide some inspiration but might prove to be impractical. Democratization in the Middle East generates challenging policy choices for the external actors. Times of transitions are by nature uncertain and unstable, particularly in the short term. They also involve clear risks. The unwillingness of the external actors to undertake such risks and insist on promoting democracy while holding fast to their short-term security interests undermines their credibility. At best, they appear confusingly eclectic in both their values and their policies. Worse, they are

perceived as strong backers of authoritarian, non-democratic regimes in the region. Democracy is good to promote when it is in the interests of the external actors, and can be readily undermined when it threatens such interests. It will be difficult to reconcile (at least over the short term) a declaratory position of promoting change and the practical policy of maintaining stability. Some tough choices have to be made, even if the outcome is unpredictable and the possible new players are not to the liking of Western policy makers. Ironically, this precarious choice might provide more stability in the long term.

For the internal promoters of democracy, the challenges are even greater. They seem to be caught between a constituency that might not yet consider democracy as a primary value and ruling regimes that are too entrenched and too difficult to dislodge. It is unfair to place all the blame on Arab societies for their apathy, lack of participation, and withdrawal from politics. So far, most democracy activists have been elitists, with an alienating discourse and unappealing, hesitant political stands. "Liberal" Arab intellectuals need to come up with an "Arab" or indigenous liberal model, which can be posited in terms free from specific Western historical experiences and built on existing social and political realities in their own societies and the dominant belief system of the people. While it is useful to focus on democracy as a "grand end," perhaps at this transitional juncture, it might be necessary to give more intellectual attention to the processes and mechanisms of the transition and making this "end" tenable. Activists, in particular, need to build clear links between democracy and the fulfillment of people's aspirations for development and economic growth, independence, and sovereignty. Considering the gradual, and sometimes reversible, nature of the process of democratization, the internal democracy promoters should take advantage of any existing openings, form a consensus on common aspects of reform, and build strong democratic blocs to offset the power of their respective hegemonic regimes.

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