

Reforming the Middle East: Policies and Paradoxes

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In December 2002, US Secretary of State Colin Powell unveiled the “US-Middle East Partnership Initiative” (MEPI), a series of programs intended to “support the expansion of political opportunity throughout the Middle East.”¹ MEPI would rest on three pillars: first, working with the public and private sector in the region to “to bridge the jobs gap with economic reform, business investment, and private sector development;” second, working with community groups “to close the freedom gap with projects to strengthen civil society, expand political participation, and lift the voices of women;” and third, working with parents and educators to “to bridge the knowledge gap with better schools and more opportunities for higher education.”² According to the White House, this—together with the overthrow of Saddam Hussein—comprises part of a “forward strategy of freedom to promote democracy throughout the Middle East.”³

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¹ US Department of State, Fact Sheet, *US-Middle East Partnership Initiative*, 18 June 2003, available at <http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/22251.htm>.

² Colin Powell, “The US-Middle East Partnership Initiative: Building Hope for the Years Ahead,” speech to the Heritage Foundation, Washington DC, 12 December 2002, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2002/15920.htm>.

³ White House (Office of the Press Secretary), Fact Sheet: President Bush Calls for a “Forward Strategy of Freedom” to Promote Democracy in the Middle East, 6 November 2003, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-11.html>. See also George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy,” Washington DC, 6 November 2003, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-2.html>.

In the run-up for the 2004 G8 Summit, Washington also circulated a broader proposal for a “Greater Middle East Partnership” to its summit partners.⁴ European reaction was generally positive, albeit with somewhat greater emphasis on dialogue, incrementalism, and institutionalized cooperation. The EU pointed to its own well-established Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (“Barcelona Process”), begun in 1995, as indicative of its preexisting engagement in this area. It also highlighted the importance of addressing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Discussion among G8 partners finally resulted in the declaration of a common “Partnership for Progress and a Common Future with the Region of the Broader Middle East and North Africa” at the G8 summit at Sea Island, Georgia on 9 June 2004,⁵ together with an associated “Plan of Support for Reform.”⁶

This paper will examine the reform agenda, and reform efforts, adopted by Washington and by the G8. In so doing, it will assess the strategic rationale for reform measures, the linkages between reform and regional security, and the prospects for success. It will conclude by highlighting the challenges and obstacles to political change in the Middle East.⁷

The Roots of the Reform Agenda

The current attention to political reform—in Washington in particular—has three main sets of roots.

The first of these is the undeniable fact that most of the Middle East has proven particularly resistant to the so-called “third wave” of global democratization (see Figure 1). Michael Hudson’s seminal 1988 presidential address to the Middle East Studies Association was an early, and important, effort to identify the factors that might contribute to political reform in the region.⁸ However, while analysts were cautiously

⁴ See the text of the draft working paper published in *al-Hayat*, 13 February 2004.

⁵ G8, *Partnership for Progress and a Common Future with the Region of the Broader Middle East and North Africa*, 9 June 2004, available at http://www.g8usa.gov/d_060904c.htm. The

⁶ G8, *Plan of Support for Reform*, 9 June 2004, available at http://www.g8usa.gov/d_060904b.htm

⁷ For the most part, the consolidation of Turkish democracy will not be addressed in this paper, despite its delivery to a conference in Ankara. The dynamics of Turkish political democratization seem rather different to those in the Arab world and Iran—in particular, the incentive of possible future EU membership as an incentive for political reform.

⁸ Michael Hudson “Democratization and the Problem of Legitimacy in Middle East Politics,” *MESA Bulletin* 22, 2 (December 1988).

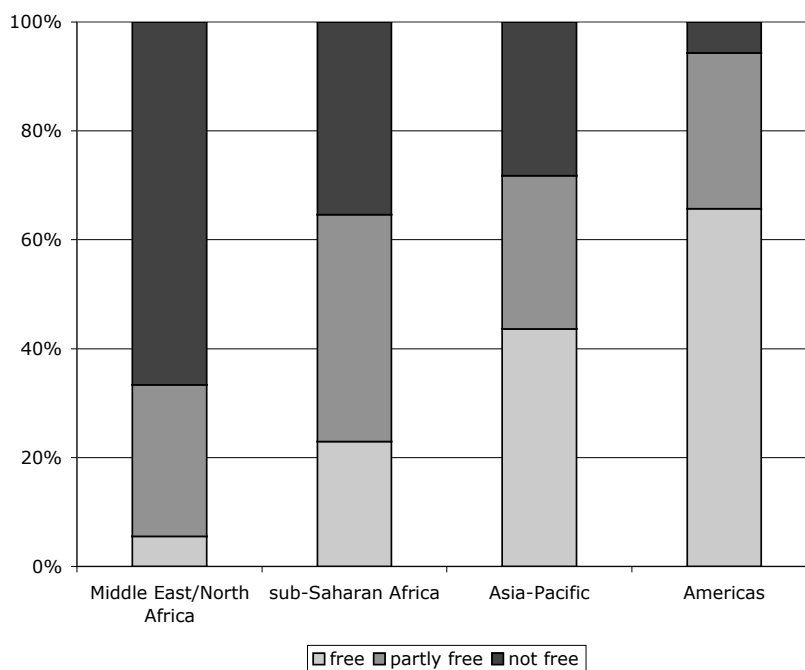


Figure 1: Political Freedom (selected regions)

Source: Freedom House (2004)

optimistic about the prospects for political reform, especially after the 1990-91 Gulf War, it soon became apparent that most openings in the region would be limited at best, and transitory at worst. Among scholars, attention to the political liberalization and democratization gave way to a new literature attempting to explain the puzzle of persistent Middle Eastern authoritarianism.⁹

The second set of roots for US support for Middle Eastern reform can be found among American neoconservatives, who argued for a thoroughgoing transformation of Middle Eastern (especially Arab) authoritarian regimes.¹⁰ This impulse was a complex

⁹ For a survey of this work, see Bahgat Korany, Rex Brynen, eds., *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World, Volume I: Theoretical Perspectives and Volume II: Comparative Experiences* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995, 1998). For more recent analysis of the failures of political reform, see the special issue of *Comparative Politics* on “Enduring Authoritarianism: Lessons from the Middle East for Comparative Theory,” 36, 2 (January 2004).

¹⁰ This is not to argue that neoconservatives provided the only ideological foundation for this policy. Many liberals were also attracted to the idea of a campaign for Middle East democracy. Conversely, realist conservatives may see the export of American democracy as a diversion from necessary power politics.

one: in part, it represented a genuine and principled desire to export American liberty; in part, it was because Arab authoritarianism was seen as a threat to US and Israeli national security. Certainly, this vision found resonance among some supporters of Israel, as a way of deflecting attention away the continued Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory. It also found resonance among some in the Christian right, either out of genuine concern at religious intolerance in the region, or out of scarcely veiled antipathy to Muslim societies.

It is likely that neither of these factors would have been sufficient to have brought much change to US foreign policy if it hadn't been for a third development: the terrorist attacks of 9/11. In the aftermath of that day, several connections were seen between al-Qa'ida –type extremism and Middle Eastern authoritarianisms. Authoritarian regimes (such as Taliban Afghanistan) could provide direct sanctuary and support for Islamist militants, or might transfer weapons of mass destruction to terrorist groups. Authoritarian regimes were also seen, as academic analysts of “democratic peace” have long argued, as inherently more conflict-prone than democratic ones. Repressive systems of governance and political exclusion were seen as having spurred the growth of militant Islamist political opposition in the region. Additionally, the Middle East was also seen as suffering from inadequate education systems, weak economies (and hence growing numbers of dissatisfied citizens), and only marginal participation in the benefits of economic and social globalization. According to the White House, “As long as freedom and democracy do not flourish in the Middle East, that region will remain stagnant, resentful, and violent—and serve as an exporter of violence and terror to free nations.”¹¹

Authoritarianism and Regional Security in the Middle East

Normatively, there is much to commend greater US and Western support for political reform in the Middle East, especially in light of decades of past alliance with repressive regimes and scant attention to human rights by either Washington or Europe. There are also some clear regional security pay-offs. Certainly, perceptions of past

Some conservatives may also argue that Muslim or Arab political culture makes democratic transformation unlikely.

¹¹ White House (Office of the Press Secretary), *Fact Sheet: President Bush Calls for a "Forward Strategy of Freedom" to Promote Democracy in the Middle East*.

Western support for Middle Eastern dictatorship has fuelled anti-Americanism in the region. It is probably also the case that, within authoritarian regimes, political exclusion fuels militant radicalism, as Lisa Anderson, Michael Hudson, and others have argued.¹² In some regimes, the state has either embraced (Saudi Arabia) or tolerated (Pakistan) ideologies, groups, and educational curriculum that tend to be xenophobic towards the West.

At the same time, promoting regional security through a “forward strategy of democracy” in the Middle East soon encounters a number of challenges:

- Authoritarian regimes are hardly likely to see their security interests served by efforts to weaken their hold on power. External calls for reform or regime change may come to be seen as a source of insecurity, and may spark renewed domestic repression or efforts to enhance military preparedness.¹³
- Washington’s geostrategic interests in the Middle East—ranging from alliances and military bases through to diplomatic and intelligence support in the “war on terrorism”—requires cooperation from existing (authoritarian) regimes. Moreover, US counter-terrorism policy makes use of state repression by allies to extract information.
- Given intense public opposition to current US foreign policies on the part of much of the population in the Middle East, political liberalization is likely to result in greater (not less) public criticism of Washington.
- Similarly, the primary and most immediate beneficiaries of democratic reform in much of the region would be Islamist groups adamantly opposed to American policy.

The resulting paradoxes are already apparent. US criticism of Middle Eastern authoritarianism tends to be trenchant when applied to geopolitical foes (such as Iran),

¹² Lisa Anderson, “Fulfilling Prophecies: State Policy and Islamist Radicalism,” in John Esposito, ed., *Political Islam: Revolution, Radicalism or Reform?* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1997); Michael Hudson, “Arab Regimes and Democratization: Responses to the Challenge of Political Islam,” in Laura Guazzone, ed., *The Islamist Dilemma* (Reading: Ithaca, 1995).

¹³ For example, President Bush’s labeling of Iran as part of the “axis of evil,” and open talk among some in Washington about the need change for regime change in Tehran, has undoubtedly stiffened the resolve of many Iranian national security planners to acquire potential or actual nuclear capacity as a safeguard against intervention.

but much less so when applied to allies (notably the Arab absolute monarchies of the Gulf). Human rights abuses are decried, but the process of “extraordinary rendition” is used to transfer terrorism suspects to torture-practicing allies. A free media is praised, but *al-Jazeera* and other Arab satellite television stations are attacked for reflecting the negative image most Arabs hold of US foreign policy.¹⁴ Elections are viewed as desirable—unless, as in Palestine, they are likely to benefit Islamists or reelect an undesirable Yasir Arafat, in which case they are to be tacitly opposed.

In addition to this, US-led intervention in Iraq—justified in part as “an opportunity...to demonstrate in one of the most important countries in the Arab world that Arabs are capable of democracy”¹⁵—has undoubtedly had reform-retarding effects, at least in the short and medium term. Public anger in the Arab world at US occupation has played to the advantage of Islamist groups, rather than to the advantage of more secular and more pro-Western liberals. Arab regimes, especially those allied to an unpopular Washington, have grown more rather than less concerned at the possible effects of relaxing their hold on power. Scenes of political violence and ethnic tension in Iraq may well have convinced some in other potentially divided societies that post-authoritarian politics may be more of a curse than blessing. At an operational level, suicide bombs, improvised explosive devices, kidnappings, and beheadings in Iraq will likely prove to be an inspiration for militants elsewhere in the region and the world.

In noting such paradoxes, the point here is not to cast doubt on the genuineness of the Bush Administration’s desire to promote political reform in the Middle East. I believe that intent to be genuine, if sometimes colored by ulterior motives or tinged with a little ideological blindness or political naiveté. Nor is it to imply that Washington’s efforts in this area are somehow more self-serving or less effective than those of others, such as the European Union. To its credit the US government publicly issues reasonably hard-hitting

¹⁴ “Rumsfeld: al-Jazeera is Causing Deaths,” *Associated Press* via *Fox News*, 6 February 2004, at <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,110643,00.html>. US Secretary of State Colin Powell has also pressed Qatar to rein in al-Jazeera coverage. “Al-Jazeera TV Clouds US-Qatar Ties, Says Powell,” *Agence France Presse*, 28 April 2004. This is not to say that Arab satellite TV stations uphold BBC or CNN standards of journalism—they don’t, and broadcasts can often report innuendo as fact or frame news in an anti-American perspective. On the other hand, they are often not much worse than the conservative, sensationalist bias of Fox News.

¹⁵ US Department of Defense, “Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz Interview with New England Cable News,” 23 March 2003, online at http://www.dod.gov/transcripts/2003/t03242003_t0323nec.html.

annual reports on human rights and religious freedom, something that the EU and few (if any) European countries do.

MEPI, the “Partnership for Progress,” and the Prospects for Reform

What are the prospects for recent initiatives making a substantial contribution to reform efforts in the Middle East? To answer this, to first identify the specific factors impeding democratization in the region, and then examine the sorts of policy instruments that have been adopted in the US MEPI and the G8 “Partnership for Progress.”

Obstacles to Democratization

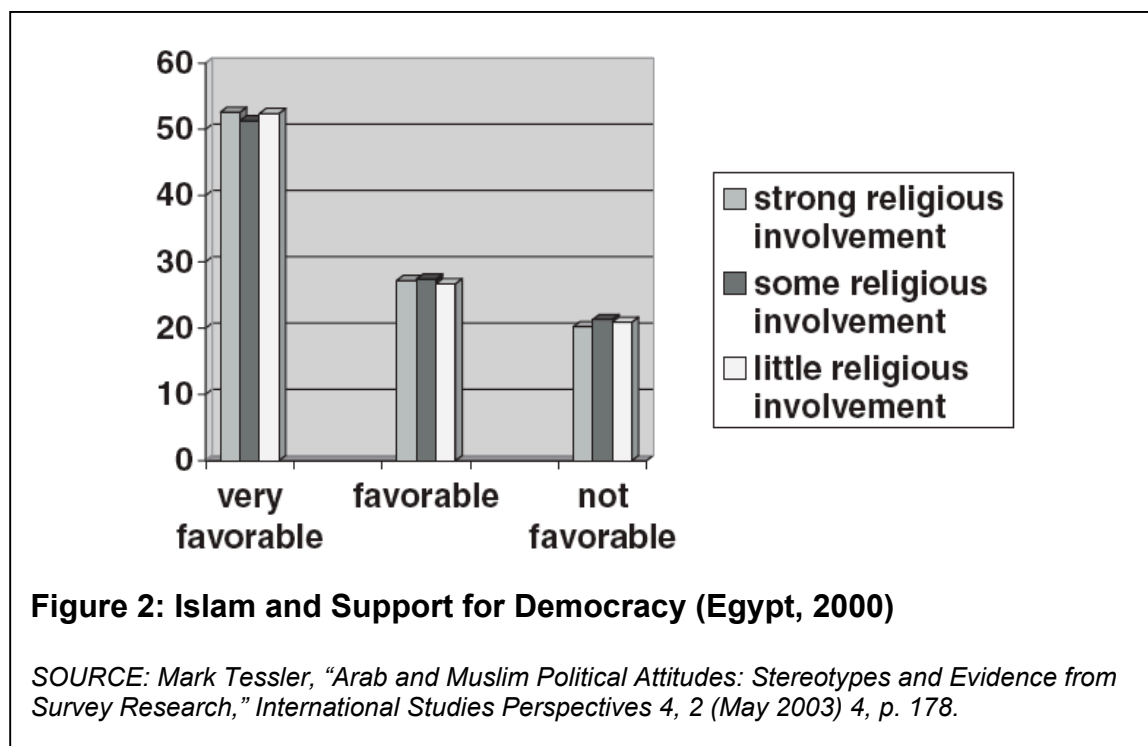
There is, to date, little consensus as to why the authoritarian regimes of the Middle East have proven so resistant to political reform. Instead, several sets of explanations have been advanced:

political culture. Middle Eastern authoritarianism has been attributed by some to deep-seated attitudes to leadership and political community entrenched with Arab and/or Islamic political culture. Martin Kramer, for example, argues that Arab society is culturally intolerant, and that Islamist movements are ever unlikely to contribute to a democratic political order.¹⁶ In such a view, external efforts at democratization are destined to fail, and might even prove dangerous if they empower fundamentalists. Reform, in Kramer’s view, can really only come with gradual political-cultural change from within Middle Eastern societies. Others argue that political culture is important, but far more varied, complex, and changeable than “primordialists” like Kramer would suggest.¹⁷ Survey work by Mark Tessler in a number of countries has repeatedly found no substantial linkages between religious belief and support for democracy in the Middle East (Figure 2).¹⁸ Still others suggest that political culture is a seductively easy but

¹⁶ Martin Kramer, “Should America Promote a Liberal, Democratic Middle East?” 2002 Weinberg Founders Conference, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, available online at <http://www.geocities.com/martinkramerorg/Landsdowne2002.htm>. See also Kramer, “Islam vs Democracy,” at <http://www.geocities.com/martinkramerorg/IslamvsDemocracy.htm>.

¹⁷ Michael Hudson, “The Political Culture Approach to Arab Democratization: The Case for Bringing It Back In, Carefully,” in Korany Brynen, and Noble, eds., *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World, Volume I: Theoretical Perspectives*.

¹⁸ Mark Tessler, “Do Islamic Orientations Influence Attitudes Toward Democracy in the Arab World? Evidence from the World Values Survey in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Algeria, *International Journal of*



analytically limited way of explaining either authoritarianism or political change in the region.¹⁹

civil society. Another frequent explanation for enduring authoritarianism in the region points to the absence of a strong civil society that might foster pluralism and counterweigh the power of the state. Why this might be so is complex—is it a product of political culture, historical/political legacies, family structure, political economy, regime policy, or (most probably) a combination of all these? Civil society explanations of political reform are potentially more optimistic than most political culture explanations, since they hold out the possibility of both faster change and a greater potential positive role for outside actors.

Some civil society approaches link economic and political liberalization by suggesting a particular role for the middle class and business sector in promoting reform.

Comparative Sociology (Spring 2003); Mark Tessler. Islam and Democracy in the Middle East: The Impact of Religious Orientations on Attitudes Toward Democracy in Four Arab Countries, *Comparative Politics* 34 (April 2002).

¹⁹ Lisa Anderson, "Democracy in the Arab World: A Critique of the Political Culture Approach," in Brynen, Korany, and Noble, eds., *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World, Volume I: Theoretical Perspectives*.

There is relatively little evidence that this has been the case in the Middle East, however. On the contrary, business elites seem happy to negotiate a *modus vivendi* with those who hold political power, while regimes have often used discretionary economic reform as a carrot to reward loyal sectors of the business community. As Pete Moore and Bassel Salloukh have argued, “Given the acquiescence (and even support) of business associations to the stagnation and reversal of political liberalization [in the Middle East] it seems apparent that organized business will support a regime in which it feels its interests are considered, even if the speed of reform does not match its desires.”²⁰

political economy. A variety of analyses have been offered that attempt to link Middle East authoritarianism to particular aspects of national and regional economy. One of the most important of these is the concept of *rentierism*, which suggests that high levels of external earnings from petroleum exports (and, to a lesser extent, from foreign aid) reduce the dependence of regimes on domestic taxation. This in turn has lessened demands for political representation and allowed regimes to purchase (or, more accurately, lease) the loyalties of their populations through public expenditures. At the same time, external rents also finance the growth of state coercive capacities, providing additional capacities to quell domestic opposition.²¹ Within the academic literature there has been considerable debate in recent years over the empirical validity of the rentier thesis.²² It also seems likely that rentier politics would be subject to diminishing returns over time, as citizens come to expect rent-financed public services and employment as a norm. Stagnant or declining rents and services would therefore create a sense of relative deprivation, potentially fuelling anti-regime sentiment.

A related political economy approach points to the importance of fiscal crisis in the breakdown of authoritarian states (whether rentier or non-rentier), and/or the importance of economic structural adjustment in breaking down old political coalitions

²⁰ Pete Moore and Bassel Salloukh, “Professional Associations, The State, and Fiscal Crisis in the Middle East,” December 2003, available at <http://www.mcgill.ca/icames/events/papers/>.

²¹ Hazem Beblawi, “The Rentier State in the Arab World,” and Giacomo Luciani, “Allocation vs Production States: A Theoretical Framework,” both in Giacomo Luciani, ed., *The Arab State* (London: Routledge, 1990).

²² Michael L. Ross, “Does Oil Hinder Democracy?” *World Politics* 5, 3 (April 2001), pp. 325-61; Michael Herb, “No Representation without Taxation? Rents, Development, and Democracy,” *Comparative Politics* (forthcoming), at http://www.gsu.edu/~polmfh/herb_rentier_state.pdf.

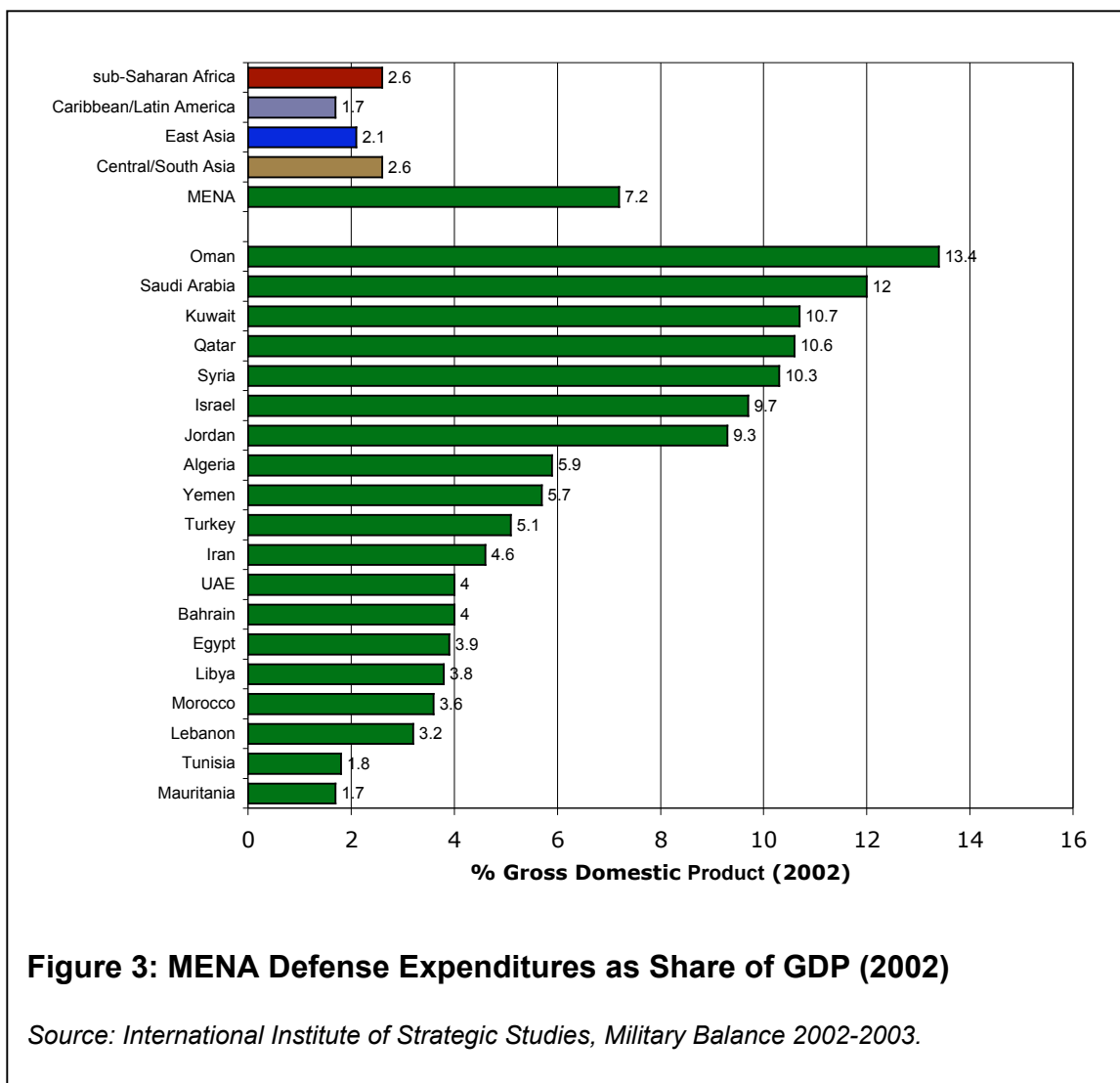
and creating new ones. Such conditions, it has been suggested, are amenable to greater state-society bargaining and the forging of new social-political contracts. However, while they might hasten the old order, they in no way guarantee that the political transition will be one to democratic politics.²³

A focus on rentierism as the foundations of Middle East authoritarianism suggests that external actors have little leverage over the pace of reform. Instead, oil prices—and hence the ability of regimes to buy off pressures from below—will have far more determinative effects on political development. Current high oil prices (and an increased flow of petroleum-related remittances to the oil poor states of the region) are likely to reduce pressures for both political and economic change.

A focus on economic structural adjustment as an engine of political change might hold out a somewhat more optimistic assessment. It could be argued that while petroleum earnings may slow pressures for reform in some oil-producing countries, this will be much less so in other Middle Eastern states. Moreover, economic reform is driven not only fiscal crisis, but also by the pressure to attract investment and promote trade competitiveness in a globalizing world economy. There is widespread recognition, inside and outside the region, that most Middle Eastern states have a relatively poor record of (non-oil) economic growth.²⁴ Therefore, policy change is more likely than the “rentierism + high oil prices” equation would suggest. Whether this might take the form of democratization, however—or a much more limited form of corporatist inclusion of liberalized authoritarianism—remains an open question.

²³ Daniel Brumberg, “Authoritarian legacies and Reform Strategies in the Arab World,” in Brynen, Korany, and Noble, eds., *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World, Volume I: Theoretical Perspectives*; John Waterbury, “From Social Contracts to Extraction Contracts: The Political Economy of Authoritarianism and Democracy.” in John P. Entelis, ed. *Islam, Democracy, and the State in North Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

²⁴ For a detailed assessment and analysis, see the four volume study by the World Bank on “Jobs, Growth, and Governance in the Middle East and North Africa: Unlocking the Potential for Prosperity” (September 2003), available at <http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/mna/mena.nsf>



regional conflict and state militarization. Another possible explanation of enduring authoritarianism in the Middle East points to high levels of regional conflict and insecurity, and consequent the growth of large military-establishments, repressive state capacities, and militarized state-society relations—the *mukhabarat* (secret police) state. The Middle East and North Africa devoted some 7.2% of its total Gross Domestic Product to military expenditures in 2002, the highest proportion of any region and almost three times the global average of 2.6% (see Figure 3).²⁵ Regional insecurity not only sustains the development of coercive apparatuses, but it also provides an ideological justification for domestic repression. Domestic critics—whether militants or reformists,

²⁵ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2002-2003* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), Table 33.

secessionist groups or ethnic minorities seeking cultural recognition, terrorists or human rights activists—are all treated as national security threats. Through this prism, even Iranian bloggers (internet news/discussion websites) can be labeled as part of a complex external/CIA conspiracy to subvert the government.²⁶

The connection between national security capacities and domestic repression is not an automatic or linear one. Israel, after all, devotes significant capacities to its military, yet maintains democratic domestic politics.²⁷ Turkey has a large military and undergone significant democratic development—and, while the Turkish military's role in politics has been far from unproblematic, clearly defense expenditures and reform are not fundamentally incompatible. Even in the Arab world, there is no direct link between the size of the military and the degree of domestic repression.

To the extent that the connection is important, it suggests that improving the conditions for democratic reform in the Middle East requires an amelioration of regional security tensions (rather than, as some would argue, vice-versa). Unfortunately the prognosis here is not terribly encouraging. The Palestinian-Israeli peace process has collapsed. Within Palestinian society, militant voices have grown stronger. On the Israeli side, the government of Ariel Sharon seems committed to settlement expansion and retaining permanent control over large areas of the occupied Palestinian territories, policies that virtually guarantee many years of conflict to come. In Iraq, a stable and democratic order might eventually emerge. In the short and medium term, however, US-led intervention has clearly destabilized the region, and increased regional insecurities for most actors.

political institutions. There has been increased attention among scholars of Middle Eastern authoritarianism and democratization as to the importance of preexisting institutions, including constitutional structures, legislatures, judicial independence, and the rule of law. There is a danger of circularity in such an analysis, of course: one cannot

²⁶ For a discussion, see Hossein Derakhshan, , "CIA Runs "Spider's Web" in Iran, Radical Paper Claims," *Editor: Myself* weblog, posted 29 September 2004, online at <http://hoder.com/weblog/archives/012304.shtml>. A number of Iranian bloggers were subsequently arrested and charged with "acting against national security, disturbing the public mind and insulting sanctities." *BBC News*, 13 October 2004, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3740336.stm.

²⁷ Of course, it could be argued that many of these military capacities are directly or indirectly linked to the rather more undemocratic denial of Palestinian self-determination in the West Bank and Gaza.

usefully explain the absence of democratic institutions by reference to the absence of democratic institutions. Nevertheless, as institutionalists remind us, politics is often path dependent, and structures and choices made at one point may well open up or foreclose other choices at a later point.

There are several versions of such an institutionalist approach. One has already been suggested by the prior discussion of the *mukhabarat* state above. Another examines the role that prior constitutional and legal orders may play in the shaping prospects for reform.²⁸ This is undoubtedly very important, and very much understudied, in the Middle Eastern context—although it offers only limited insight into why Middle Eastern authoritarianisms have proven so resilient. Some have sought to explain variations in political development in the Middle East—and, in particular, the greater success of democratization in Turkey—by reference to the development of political parties and party systems, and the complex web of rules, institutions, and social forces that shape this.²⁹

Others have begun to focus on the politics of monarchical survival in the Middle East, and the potential for reform within such systems. This is particularly germane, given the unique degree to which Kings still both reign and rule in many states in the region. Michael Herb, for example, has suggested that large dynastic monarchies, and the penetration and oversight of key state sectors by members of large royal families, may explain why such regimes have managed to survive.³⁰ There has been considerable

²⁸ See, for example, Nathan Brown, *The Rule of Law in the Arab World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), and Nathan Brown, *Constitutions in a Nonconstitutional World: Arab Basic Laws and the Prospects for Accountable Government* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 2001).

²⁹ Michele Penner Angrist, “Party Systems and Regime Formation in the Modern Middle East: Explaining Turkish Exceptionalism,” *Comparative Politics* 36, 2 (January 2004). Vickie Langohr argues, interestingly, that there has been too much civil society in the Arab world—or, more specifically, that NGOs have tended to displace political parties as advocates and opposition, with deleterious implications for democratization. Vickie Langohr, “Too Much Civil Society, Too Little Politics: Egypt and Liberalizing Arab Regimes,” *Comparative Politics* 36, 2 (January 2004).

³⁰ Michael Herb, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1999). For other views, see Joseph Kostiner, “Introduction;” F. Gregory Gause II, “The Persistence of Monarchy in the Arabian Peninsula: A Comparative Analysis;” and Lisa Anderson, “Dynasts and Nationalists: Why Monarchies Survive;” all in Joseph Kostiner, ed., *Middle East Monarchies: The Challenge of Modernity* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000).

debate as to whether—ironically—some Arab monarchies might be better suited to undertake (possibly limited) political reform than are the Arab republics.³¹

There has also been attention to the extent to which highly neopatrimonial, patronage-based political systems in the Middle East might be particularly resistant to deep political change, or ill-suited to democratic change.³² Such an explanation potentially links to political culture explanations (if patrimonialism is seen as having deep cultural roots) and/or political economy explanations (if neopatrimonialism is seen as arising from external rents and other specific patterns of resource distribution).

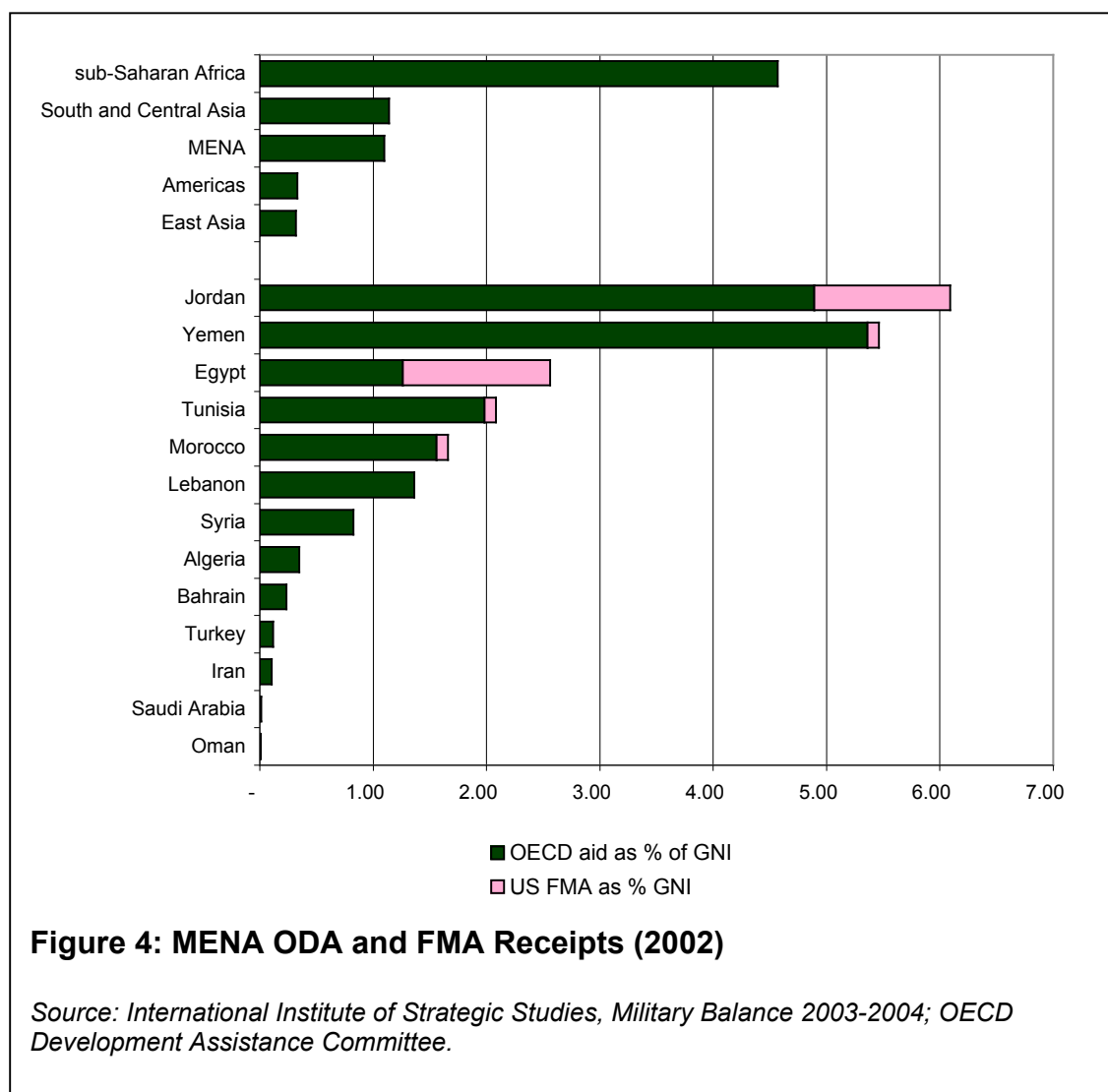
Most institutionalist explanations suggest that there is some scope for external encouragement of political reform, especially by strengthening the rule of law, independent judiciaries, legislatures, parties, and other important institutions through technical assistance. However, it is only those political systems already most amenable to reform, and where the proto-institutions of democratic politics already exist, where such external assistance is likely to be possible. Moreover, change is likely to be slow and incremental at best.³³

external support. A final explanation of Middle East authoritarianism focuses on the historical role of external actors, and now especially the United States, in propping up regional dictatorships through development assistance, military aid, and threats of direct intervention. Certainly, there are cases where nondemocratic regimes have enjoyed substantial outside aid, or where the West has acquiesced in state repression (such as past military intervention in politics in Turkey or Algeria). However, it is far from clear that such aid has been a substantial factor in the persistence of authoritarianism in the Middle East. For a start, many repressive regimes in the region are not eligible for economic aid because of their relatively rich (oil) economies, while others (such as Syria, Sudan, Iran)

³¹ Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany, and Paul Noble, "Conclusion: Liberalization, Democratization, and Arab Experiences," in Korany, Brynen, and Noble, eds. *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World, Volume II: Comparative Experiences*, pp. 275-276; Michael Herb, "Princes and Parliaments in the Arab World," *Middle East Journal* 58, 3 (Summer 2004). Such explanations usually point to the ability of monarchs to claim to be "above politics" and acting as a referee of the national interest amid liberalization.

³² Eva Beilin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics* 36, 2 (January 2004), pp. 149-150, 153.

³³ On some of the difficulties of this, see Nathan Brown, "Arab Judicial Reform: Bold Visions, Few Achievements," *Arab Reform Bulletin* 2, 9 (October 2004), online at http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/2004_October_ARB3.pdf



are considered unfriendly and hence do not enjoy either economic or military support in the post-Cold War era. Indeed, relative to the size of their economies, most Middle East regimes receive less Western (OECD) official development assistance (ODA) than do many other developing countries (see Figure 4). Similarly, only in Jordan and Egypt does Western (US) foreign military assistance (FMA) exceed 0.05% of Gross National Income (GNI).³⁴

³⁴ Figure 3 excludes Israel, and only lists ODA-receiving countries. It also excludes (negligible) non-US FMA to MENA, and US FMA outside the Middle East and North Africa (also negligible). International Institute of Strategic Studies, *Military Balance 2003-2004* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Development Assistance Committee of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, *Statistical Annex of the 2003 Development Co-operation Report*, at http://www.oecd.org/document/9/0,2340,en_2649_34447_1893129_1_1_1_1,00.html.

Also, it is not clear that external military and economic support necessarily stabilizes regimes. On the contrary, given the current unpopularity of US foreign policy in the region, close ties to the US in particular may do as much to undermine internal security as to enhance it. Moreover—and despite American and British military intervention in civil unrest in Lebanon and Jordan in the 1950s—it is difficult to imagine Western intervention to prop up collapsing Middle Eastern dictatorship in the current era.

If external support has not been a substantial factor in the recent stability of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, Western willingness to tolerate such authoritarianism may have been somewhat more important. Given the strategic importance of the region, both Washington and Europe governments have generally been reluctant to antagonize most of them by conditioning aid on political reform or exerting substantial pressure over human rights issues. In the rush to reward Muammar Qaddafi for his abandonment of WMD, for example, barely a murmur has been heard about the repressive nature of the Libyan regime.

Elements of the Reform Agenda

Given the sorts of analyses presented above, what can one say about the prospects of the MEPI and the G8 initiative to promote real reform in the region?

As noted earlier, the US-Middle East Partnership Initiative proposed greater American engagement in four main areas (or “pillars”): economic growth, education, women’s rights, and civil society. In FY 2002 and FY2003 (combined) some \$129 million in additional funding has been allocated to programming in these areas, in addition to existing US assistance. Compared to the annual \$1.6 billion in US assistance to the Middle East and North Africa, this is hardly a large volume of new funds, although supplemental funding is slated to grow in coming years.

All four of the pillars of MEPI are important areas of concern, and they echo both the assessments and priorities outlined by Arab social scientists themselves in the 2002 and 2003 *Arab Human Development Reports*.³⁵ However, the likely contribution of such policies to regional democratization will be limited at best most cases.

³⁵ United Nations Development Report, *Arab Human Development Report 2002* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) and *Arab Human Development Report 2003* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). The 2002 AHDR in particular emphasizes the critical importance of enhancing respect for human

Economic growth—and, more specifically, the sort of private sector entrepreneurship-focused programs and economic reforms envisaged by MEPI—are unlikely to have much effect of political reform. While they might marginally strengthen business voices, such voices have not been standard-bearers of democratization in much of the Middle East, as earlier noted.

Education reform is a double-edged sword. While changes in curriculum might promote greater social tolerance, the unmet economic and social expectations of educated youth have been a major sources of grievance that militant groups have capitalized upon in their recruitment. Moreover, education reform has been rendered more difficult now in some countries by its apparent connection with (highly unpopular) US foreign policy.

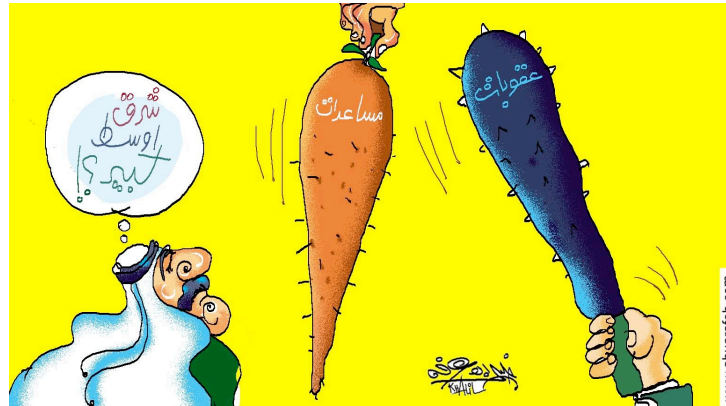
The expansion of women's rights, and greater economic and political participation by women, is essential in the Middle East given its generally poor record in this regard. However, while expansion of women's participation is a form of democratization in and of itself, it is not clear that it necessarily contributes to greater pressure for other political reforms. Indeed, there is some survey evidence from Turkey,³⁶ Palestine,³⁷ and Egypt and Morocco³⁸ that women tend to be slightly less supportive of democracy—or, at least, see it as less of a priority than immediate welfare concerns—than do men. Conversely, it is also not clear that democratization necessarily enhances women's rights in the short and medium term, especially if liberalization and democratization tends to benefit conservative and Islamist political groups. In Kuwaiti, the elected (male) parliament has overturned royal efforts to enfranchise women. In Jordan, the elected lower house of parliament has resisted efforts by the King and the (appointed) upper house to increase criminal penalties for “honor killings” of women or to make divorce laws more equitable. In Morocco, the King has had to press limited gender reforms on a reluctant parliament. As Laurie Brand has noted, women need to be full players in processes of reform, and for liberalization to be genuine it must address the

rights and freedoms (the “freedom deficit”), greater empowerment of women (the “women's empowerment deficit”), and more effective education and knowledge utilization (the “knowledge deficit”).

³⁶ Mark Tessler and Ebru Altinoglu, “Political Culture in Turkey: Connections Among Attitudes Towards Democracy, the Military, and Islam,” *Democratization* 11, 1 (February 2004), p. 39.

³⁷ World Bank, *Aid Effectiveness in the West Bank and Gaza* (Washington DC: World Bank, June 2000), p. 77 (“Women placed slightly greater emphasis than men on the health and water sectors, and slightly less emphasis on... democratic development.”)

³⁸ Tessler, “Do Islamic Orientations Influence Attitudes Toward Democracy in the Arab World?”



The “Greater Middle East”? The carrot (aid) is another form of the club (sanctions).

Source: Khalil Abu Arafah, *al-Quds* (Palestine), 7 March 2004.



The “Greater Middle East” as a trap to normalize with Israel.

Source: Hamed, *al-Ittihad* (UAE) 7 March 2004.

Figure 5: Arab Editorial (Cartoon) Comment on “Greater Middle East” Reform Initiatives.

greater inclusion of women. However, “future periods of political transition will continue to constitute years of living dangerously” for Middle Eastern women.³⁹

The enhancement of civil society (including parties and the media) is perhaps the most promising element of MEPI, although here too programming faces many challenges. The most favored recipients of such aid—“moderate,” liberal, semi-secular

³⁹ Laurie Brand, *Women, The State, and Political Liberalization: Middle Eastern and North African Experiences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 264.

groups—may be elitist with few roots in local society, while the more active and effective organizations may be those (such as Islamist associations) least amenable to Western/US policy. External aid may also cause dysfunctional competition within civil society, as well as countermoves by local governments to blunt its effects.⁴⁰ It may also be based on ethnocentric presumptions of how democracy should work, naïve understandings of local politics, or systematically weak implementation on the ground.⁴¹ Once again, in the context of the Middle East, Western (and especially US) support for such efforts can negatively color local perceptions of the democratization agenda, which comes to be seen as part of a broader US (and, often) Israeli plot to weaken the region (Figure 5).

The G8 reform agenda includes many of the same elements as MEPI, and indeed represents a synthesis—or perhaps, more accurately, an assemblage—of past and planned US and EU activities:

- the launching of a microfinance initiative.
- increased support for literacy programs.
- enhanced support for business, vocational training, and entrepreneurship activities.
- creation of a “Broader Middle East and North Africa Private Enterprise Development Facility: at the International Finance Corporation.
- establishment of a regional “network of funds” to coordinate programs.
- creation of a task force on investment, in conjunction with Middle Eastern and G8 business leaders.
- continue a range of current initiatives in support of expanded public participation (election monitoring and assistance, parliamentary exchanges, supporting enhanced public roles for women), promoting judicial reform, promoting greater media freedom, promoting good governance, support for civil society); a knowledge society (education reform, greater access to

⁴⁰ Sheila Carapico, “Foreign Aid for Promoting Democracy in the Arab World,” *Middle East Journal* 56, 3 (Summer 2002).

⁴¹ Thomas Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999). On the promotion of democratization in the Middle East, see Thomas Carothers, *Is Gradualism Possible? Choosing a Strategy for Promoting Democracy in the Middle East*, Carnegie Endowment, Democracy and Rule of Law Project Working Paper 39, June 2003.

information technology); economic development (vocation training, encouraging small and medium sized businesses, property rights reform; modernization of the financial services sector; removing barriers to investment; promoting regional and global trade).

Little of this is remarkable, of course, and most of it is simply a continuation of existing efforts by various G8 countries to promote economic policy reform, trade, investment and private sector development. What was new in the G8 statement, however, was the proposal for a “Forum for the Future” which would provide a “ministerial framework for our on-going dialogue and engagement on political, economic, and social reform in a spirit of mutual respect” among G8 and Middle Eastern countries, and “serve as a collaborative vehicle for expanding our engagement in support of the region's reform efforts, in particular toward the enhancement of democracy and civic participation, rule of law, human rights and open market economy.” This would be complemented by “parallel business-to-business and civil society-to-civil society dialogues, whose participants will provide input on reforms and work with the Forum's member governments on implementation.” As part of this, a “Democracy Assistance Dialogue” would be established, with regular meetings of officials from the G8 and the region, local business, NGOs, and others to promote discussion and strengthening of democratization programs in the area. The first such meeting is to be convened by Turkey, Yemen, and Italy in late 2004.⁴²

High-profile dialogue initiatives such as these will help to maintain the political visibility of reform issues in the region. It is less clear, however, whether they will result in other than cosmetic change. While many authoritarian leaders in the region may believe that some modest reform is necessary to alleviate popular pressures, none wish to genuinely share greater power with their societies. Limited pluralism thus becomes an alternative to, rather than a step towards, substantial democratization.⁴³

⁴² G8, *Plan of Support for Reform*, 9 June 2004, available at http://www.g8usa.gov/d_060904b.htm.

⁴³ For a fuller version of this argument, see Brynen, Korany, and Noble, “Conclusion: Liberalization, Democratization, and Arab Experiences,” in Korany, Brynen and Noble, eds, *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World, Volume II: Arab Experiences*.

Given this, a key question will be whether the US and G8 will accept cosmetic changes, or call the bluff of regimes attempting to cloak continued authoritarianism in a rhetorical mantle of reform. The case of Tunisia—where highly undemocratic elections in October 2004 will undoubtedly reconfirm the authoritarian rule of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali—provides little grounds for optimism, despite the Ben Ali's' rhetorical claim that “These elections, for which we have provided all guarantees of transparency and integrity and offered the possibility to follow them for those from sisterly and friendly countries wishing to attend their various stages, will provide another opportunity for all to show a highly civilized behavior and embrace the principles of democracy.”⁴⁴ Because of Tunisia's pro-Western foreign policy (including close links to Washington and Paris, suppression of Islamist groups, and cooperation in the war on terrorism) and its relatively liberalized economy, criticism of the electoral process by G8 members has been strikingly muted.

Indeed, the idea that aid conditionality would be used as a lever to promote reform, or that sanctions will be adopted in any systematic way against the most authoritarian regimes in the region, is conspicuously absent from the G8 initiative (or, for that matter, the formal enunciation of the MEPI).⁴⁵

Conclusion

How one assesses the potential effectiveness of the US MEPI and G8 initiatives depends, to a great deal, on how one assesses the barriers to political reform in the region. In this author's view, political cultural factors are frequently overstated; civil society is important, but far from the magic bullet of democratization; external (especially oil rents) have substantial effect; economic liberalization might well result in a shift in domestic political relationship, but not to the degree that that proponents of free-markets-as-a-route-to-democracy would suggest. Regional conflict and militarization are significant contributors to regional authoritarianism, with the instability associated with conflict in Palestine/Israel and Iraq reducing the prospects for reform in much of the region. Political

⁴⁴ “President Ben Ali inaugurates electoral campaign, says elections are an opportunity to promote democracy in Tunis,” *Tunisia Online*, 10 October 2004, at <http://www.tunisiaonline.com/news/index.html>

⁴⁵ The only substantial exercise of international pressure in support of democratization have been efforts by France and the US to bring UN Security Council pressure to bear on Syria for its continued military presence in Lebanon.

institutions are important, and the legacies of regime neopatrimonialism are also substantial barriers to reform. External support for authoritarian regimes has not been a significant factor in the longevity of most of them, given the relatively limited size of such assistance.

Proving all of these contentions, of course, is well beyond the scope of this paper. However, if the assessment is accurate, it suggests that recent initiatives in support of Middle Eastern political reform and democratization efforts are unlikely to have substantial effect on the political configuration of the region. In turn, reform is unlikely, in the short and medium term, to necessarily enhance regional security from the perspective of either local regimes or western capitals—although it might well enhance the security of those Middle Eastern citizenries who have been the primary victims of regional authoritarianism.

Would a more substantial push—more funds, more conditionality, and more pressure—bring about greater change? Perhaps. But such a policy, to be meaningful, would require that Washington and other Western governments accept that political reform may give greater voice to some of their strongest critics in the region, the Islamists.⁴⁶ This is particularly true amid the radicalizing effects US intervention in Iraq and the collapse of the Palestinian-Israeli peace process—thus underscoring the extent to which political stabilization of Iraq and the establishment of a mutually-acceptable Palestinian-Israeli permanent status agreement are needed to enhance the prospects for productive reform.

⁴⁶ The experience of the AKP government in Turkey underlines that Islamist parties are not necessarily in contradiction to Western foreign policy interests, and indeed may come to be viewed as generally constructive and positive. However, it is doubtful that the Turkish trajectory of political development will be easily repeated elsewhere in the Middle East.