The Dilemmas of American Democracy Promotion in the Arab World

By Sean Yom

Following September 11, 2001, American foreign policy prioritized democracy promotion in the Arab states of the Middle East and North Africa, as policymakers and ideologues alike advocated the transformation of these stubborn autocracies into enlightened models of Western liberalism. President Bush’s announcement of a new “freedom agenda” in November 2003 suggested that Washington would no longer prioritize strategic friendships with local authoritarian regimes “at the expense of liberty;” the United States would instead sponsor daring political reforms in the hope of fostering democratic transitions across the Arab world. More than four grinding years later, Washington has shucked off its rhetorical overkill on Arab democracy, instead returning to its more traditional stance of maintaining geopolitical hegemony through the coercive containment of strategic threats and the support of dictatorial client states. Numerous assessments suggest that the doctrine fizzled out due to operational deficiencies in its design and implementation. However, the initiative’s failure also reflects deeper theoretical dilemmas faced by U.S. foreign policy that, if left unattended, will continue to sabotage future efforts at promoting democratization in the Arab world. First, American policymakers have proven unwilling to sponsor electoral openings that might favor the ascendance of potentially hostile Islamist groups. Second, they have refused to attach negative conditionality to reform demands made to strategic autocratic allies—that is, punishing noncompliance by withdrawing economic aid, military assistance, and other forms of support. Both obstacles reflect the reality that America’s overarching strategic goals, in particular the preservation of Israel’s security and regional hydrocarbon reserves, require a vision of regional stability that unpredictable regime shifts would endanger. Hence today’s paradox of why the democratizing intentions of a unilateral superpower—one with unmatched political and military power—have been effectively stymied by its smaller, weaker, and poorer authoritarian allies.

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For missionaries of the democratic gospel, the Arab world represents the final frontier. In comparative perspective, no other region has proven so singularly resistant to the global spread of liberal electoralism since the mid-1970s, when the “Third Wave” of democratization commenced. In the post-Cold War era, virtually no Arab state has held muster against democracy’s basic criteria—inclusive contestation and public participation in free and competitive elections for offices of chief authority—much less its more substantive prerequisite, broad constitutional protections of civil freedoms and minority rights. In both their monarchical and presidential varieties, Arab regime incumbents tend to wield unchallenged power over political arenas where legislative agencies provide few checks to executive power, and legal opposition groups (where they exist) face suffocating bureaucratic restrictions and repressive penalties. Although academic explanations for this democratic deficit vary widely, ranging from cultural and historical accounts to economic and institutionalist arguments, comparative scholars have converged on one evident fact: throughout the post-colonial era, indigenous conditions for democratization in the Arab world have been extremely inhospitable.

Yet the resilience of Arab authoritarianism did not daunt a Bush administration flush with its Iraqi victory when it announced, in late 2003, a “forward strategy of freedom” that would thrust the Middle East into the “global democratic revolution.” The demolition of Saddam Hussein’s Ba’thist state had just demonstrated the surprising fragility of one of the region’s more despotic regimes. Against this backdrop, the neoconservative “new democracy imperative” promised to unleash an armada of diplomatic pressures and democratic assistance programs that would plant the seeds of liberalism across the rest of the region, starting first with America’s closest allies. At the most senior levels of engagement, the White House and State Department began to utilize bilateral diplomatic mechanisms and public statements to prod Arab governments into accelerating long-promised reforms. Official agencies in Washington spearheaded new economic and political advocacy programs, such as the State Department’s Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), the multilateral Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative, and the Middle East Free Trade Area project. Finally, quasi-governmental public foundations like the National Endowment for Democracy expanded their grant-making and training activities to assist Arab civil society groups better.

The architects of this new enterprise drew inspiration from both past and present, from Reagan’s mythologized struggle against communism in the
1980s to the Rose and Orange Revolutions of Georgia and Ukraine in 2003 and 2004. Eager to emulate these fortuitous episodes, they theorized that American democracy promotion efforts would exert cumulative strains upon Arab governments that would ultimately force the issue of political liberalization. By empowering civil society, quickening the pace of economic development, and intensifying international pressures, the U.S. could persuade Arab monarchs and presidents to gradually expand the margins of political freedom over time. The mobilized “Arab street” could then force regime elites to enter a deepening spiral of reform concessions, culminating at some point in groundbreaking elections that would catapult new, moderate leaders into parliamentary and presidential offices. Dynastic kingdoms would dissolve into constitutional monarchies and single-party dictatorships would evolve into multiparty parliamentary republics in a veritable “democratic tsunami” effect. And, of course, as scions of American imperial assistance, the new states would be amenable to Washington’s political interests and military demands.

Such a bold doctrine drew much accolade in Washington, not least because it married two traditionally opposing poles of American foreign policy ideology. The first was the missionary idealism associated with the Wilsonian tradition of liberal internationalism, whose subscribers endowed the U.S. with the moral capacity and the historical obligation to spread democratic values onto the rest of the world. The second was the school of hard realism, a camp that had long urged the preemptive imposition of American power over the Arab world in order to quash potential security threats. The idea of endorsing democratic transitions in the Arab world brought these two communities together under a powerful neoconservative imprimatur. For liberal internationalists, it actualized America’s imagined role as a beacon against tyranny, spreading democratization for the Arabs just as it had done for the Japanese and Germans after World War Two. For realists, it would leave the U.S. more secure: it would win the war on terrorism by eliminating the authoritarian culture of political repression that had spawned al-Qaeda and its terrorist affiliates, and it would solidify Washington’s sphere of influence by seeding the region with moderate, Western-friendly democracies.

The “freedom agenda” made a tremendous splash in many Arab countries, where it sparked extensive media coverage, political gossip, and academic attention. Although many Arab journalists and intellectuals approached the budding initiative with skepticism, more than a handful of democratic activists in the region saw a historic opportunity to assemble unprecedented American support for their campaigns for liberal reforms. Likewise, back in Washington, many advocates of democratization—from Bush administration
The Arab spring was indeed a high water mark—but just that, and not the ripple of a growing wave of democratic transitions. By the end of the year, American ideologues watched aghast as the momentum for change crashed. In the fall of 2005, sectarian gridlock returned to paralyze Lebanon, President Mubarak’s “reelection” turned out to be little more than a rigged plebiscite, terrorist attacks in Jordan sidelined the palace’s democratic reform project, the House of Saud promised no more electoral trials, and civil conflict in Iraq intensified. Ironically, though, what chilled American democracy promotion the most were democratic events. In November 2005, *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin* (the Muslim Brotherhood) captured nearly a fifth of Egypt’s parliament during general elections, greatly outnumbering the few seats that went to the secular liberal parties championed by American advocates. And in January 2006, *Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya*, better known as Hamas, won general elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council, defeating the incumbent Fatah organization that both Israel and the U.S. had quietly endorsed. Such results dampened the exuberance of neoconservative pundits in Washington. Some concluded that perhaps the Arabs were indeed not ready for democracy after all; why else would they elect groups to power officials to think tanks and policy analysts—invested considerable hope in the inevitability of democratic progress. They would not need to wait long. During the riveting “Arab Spring” of 2005, American pundits declared the rebirth of Middle East history and the triumph of “people power.” In January of that year, the first competitive presidential elections in the Palestinian territories to take place in nearly a decade saw Mahmoud Abbas replace the late Yasser Arafat, while Iraqis voted in their first meaningful general elections in nearly half a century. In the months that followed, massive demonstrations in Lebanon following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri forced the withdrawal of occupying Syrian military forces, while anti-regime protests in Egypt precipitated a surprising decision by President Hosni Mubarak to open the upcoming presidential elections to opposition candidates. King Abdullah II of Jordan announced a national agenda for sweeping political reorganization, the Kuwaiti parliament granted women the right to vote, and even the closed monarchy of Saudi Arabia relented by holding the first nationwide municipal council elections since the 1960s. “The Berlin Wall has fallen,” proclaimed one euphoric Arab voice; “we can see it.”
that seemed so virulently anti-Israeli and anti-Western? Following these elections, the U.S. scaled back pressures on Mubarak to liberalize his political regime further and halted foreign aid flows to the new Palestinian government. By early 2006, disappointed reform activists in many Arab civil societies sensed that Washington had abandoned its rhetorical hyperbole on democratization across the rest of the region. Such a retreat was also quickened by the resurgence of regional tension in the broader Middle East, namely renewed friction with Iran, the unexpected Israel-Hezbollah conflict, Iraq’s degeneration into civil war, and increased Syrian belligerence. For American policymakers, maintaining regional stability in the face of these strategic challenges took precedence over an Arab democratization initiative whose predicted benefits loomed too far over the horizon. While senior officials as well as U.S. diplomatic personnel who were posted overseas in Arab capitals still paid lip service to reform ideals in public speeches, in private discussions, “stability” replaced “democracy” as the new buzzword. Indeed, throughout 2007, U.S. foreign policy discourse reflected elements of a new containment strategy against Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the remnants of al-Qaeda—a disparate collection of states and actors framed by the White House as a radical bloc threatening to destabilize a geographic swathe stretching from Lebanon to the Persian Gulf, and making the area “a more dangerous region now even than it was 10 or 20 years ago.”

Thus in just a few years the orientation of U.S. foreign policy has reverted from an enthusiastic stance of democracy promotion back to its classic Cold War-era posture of preserving geopolitical order through conventional realism shorn of liberal pretensions. As the Bush administration has expanded military involvement in Iraq and deployed coercive diplomacy against potential regional antagonists like Syria and Iran, it has also rehabilitated commitments to support key autocratic clients in the region. The huge aid and arms package announced in July 2007 exemplified this logic. The State Department renewed its military assistance levels to Egypt for the next decade, sanctioning the provision of $13 billion in unconditional arms grants through the 2018 fiscal year. It also revealed its intention to sell at least $20 billion in advanced weaponry to its Gulf Cooperation Council allies, in particular Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Such deliberate intention to bolster the coercive capabilities of authoritarian regimes whose internal abuses had once raised the ire of neoconservative advocates confirmed for many Arab liberal voices that Washington’s democratization campaign was over. Indeed, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates conceded as much in recent remarks – while presidential rhetoric about fostering Arab democracy described “a world that may be many years or decades off,” for now “grubby compromises” and “marriages of convenience” with affable despots were necessary to protect national interests.
The Islamist Conundrum

Obituaries for the post-September 11 Arab democratization project have not been kind. The short-lived period of American democracy advocacy did briefly empower a small but vocal community of liberal intellectuals and civic leaders in countries like Morocco, Jordan, and Egypt, where international pressures nudged autocratic incumbents towards enacting new, if shallow, political reforms. Indeed, the irony of this democracy promotion campaign was that the successes it facilitated the most — two marginally competitive legislative contests — produced results that ultimately caused its retraction. By and large, however, the project’s visionaries did not achieve their lofty goal. As many critics have pointed out, beyond the exceptional case of Iraq, where it took nothing less than a foreign invasion to dislodge one dictator from office, in no Arab state did genuine political turnover occur — no recalcitrant authoritarians ceded any modicum of executive power to democratic opposition groups.

For many detractors, a litany of flaws within the design and implementation of the democracy promotion doctrine conspired to make failure inevitable. First, centerpiece advocacy programs like MEPI tended to sponsor a scatter-shot of local reform schemes without a comprehensive thematic strategy, not least because they received extremely limited resources. During 2002-2005, for instance, MEPI and other flagship programs in Washington received $565 million in operating funds; during the same timeframe, the U.S. delivered roughly $13.3 billion – 26 times as much – to Arab autocratic regimes through official economic aid and military support programs. Second, official assistance to Arab civil society, an essential factor in the neoconservative napkin theory of democratization, remained mostly limited to elite organizations like human rights NGOs, liberal parties, and business associations—secular groups whose narrow bases of support within their own societies made them poorly suited to mobilize mass resistance against the state’s coercive apparatus. Third, American diplomacy as a vehicle for democracy lacked credibility due to obvious double standards. Washington urged respect for human rights despite grotesque prison scandals at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, all the while sustaining cozy alliances with abusive dictatorships outside the Middle East (e.g., Pakistan and the Central Asian republics) whose cooperation was deemed necessary for the war on terror. Moreover, the State Department’s polite efforts to nudge friends like Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia towards slow and managed reforms stood in wild contrast to the harsh rhetoric thrown at foes like Syria and Iran, where the White House mandated nothing less than total revolutionary change. Finally, democracy promoters hoped that a stable and prosperous post-Saddam Iraq would set
a viable model for the region, a positive “demonstration effect.” Instead, the country’s descent into violent turmoil seemed to underscore the dangers of rapid democratic changes to Arab regime leaders, while the illegitimacy attached to the American military occupation drove Arab public opinion further against Washington’s purported embrace of Arab political change.22

These common critiques aptly point out operational weaknesses in the content and method of democracy promotion tactics. Clearly, the Bush White House’s words outstripped deeds. As one assessment concluded, “…there was no real policy—only a mentality and a rhetorical commitment that supported democracy and freedom in very general ways.”23 However, focusing on operational criticisms alone runs the risk of missing the forest for the trees. For one, it encourages unrealistic standards of success by taking the wild expectations of American ideologues at face value; that is, because a wave of regime transitions did not spontaneously erupt, the democratization project was an abject failure. But this is a straw man tactic. Diplomatic veterans, regional specialists, and program officers hoping to elicit real Arab reforms on the ground understood their task to be an incremental, long-range mission that would unfold over decades rather than years.24 They were not deaf to scholarly judgments that although democracy promotion could be a powerful tool for kindling political reforms abroad, it was a young and imprecise craft replete with haphazard techniques, grandstanding ambitions, and unpredictable results—and that in the short-term, only modest results could be expected.25

Second and more importantly, focusing on operational criticisms alone obscures more fundamental theoretical obstacles plaguing American foreign policy towards the Arab world. The first is the unwillingness of policymakers to accept pathways of political liberalization that would result in the electoral ascendance of Islamist organizations over secular, pro-Western parties. The second is their refusal to attach political conditionality to reform demands—that is, threatening to withdraw American support if client regimes do not comply with democratic pressures. These two constrictions are not merely academic concerns. It is their confluence that explains the paradox of why dictatorial incumbents in small, poor, and weak Arab regimes have so easily defied the wishes of a hegemonic power armed with unparalleled political, economic, and military might. If left unresolved, these tensions will continue to disrupt America’s policy arsenal in any future doctrine of Arab democracy promotion.

The first of these predicaments is obvious, given Washington’s harsh reactions to the Muslim Brotherhood’s success in the November 2005 Egyptian
Many American ideologues believe that encouraging the political participation of Islamist organizations is tantamount to "helping the enemy." Given these anxieties, it is not surprising that many American ideologues believe that encouraging the political participation of Islamist organizations is tantamount to “helping the enemy.” Indeed, such ingrained fears were built into the democracy promotion initiative, which embraced a “gradualist” model of regime change. Presuming that the sudden collapse of ruling dictatorships in strategic allies like Egypt and Saudi Arabia would enable militant Islamist forces to grab power, American democratization advocates envisaged a transition process in which autocratic incumbents would progressively broaden the margins of political freedom over time, allowing moderate opposition groups to mobilize and eventually grasp a slice of power through competitive elections. Regime transitions from authoritarian rule have emerged through such slow, top-down liberalization processes before; Mexico and Taiwan are canonical examples of gradual democratization. As the Egyptian parliamentary elections demonstrate, however, many U.S. observers failed to estimate that even through the gradualist pathway of parliamentary elections and Hamas’ victory in the January 2006 Palestinian elections. These outcomes suggest that democratic openings in many Arab states would favor not the secular, liberal parties sponsored by Western governments, but rather well-organized Islamist groups. American decision-makers have steadfastly refused to endorse democratic reforms that would encourage the ascendance of Islamist parties and organizations through electoral means. Many tend to categorize all political groups organized under the Islamic banner — from expansive social movements like the Muslim Brotherhood to more narrowly constituted religious parties — as uniformly anti-Western in belief and potentially violent in behavior. After all, they reason, Islamists showed their theocratic and jihadist stripes through the Iranian Revolution, the Algerian Civil War, and the Taliban regime. Some American policymakers worry that, given their criticism over Western treatment of the Palestinian issue, Islamist-oriented governments will imperil Israel’s security by reneging on previous peace accords or threatening military aggression. They might also follow the example of OPEC in the 1970s and use local oil supplies as a political weapon, demanding blowbacks in Washington’s regional military presence lest global hydrocarbon markets suffer a sudden shortage of Arabian crude.
managed political reforms, Islamist groups enjoy immense advantages due to their broad and well-organized base of societal support, which dwarfed the weak and fragmented constituencies controlled by liberal party leaders, human rights activists, university intellectuals, and other Western-sponsored opposition elites. Indeed, as authoritarian incumbents in partially liberalized autocracies like Morocco and Jordan have discovered over the past two decades, grass-roots Islamist groups usually trounce secular liberal opposition groups whenever they are in at least partially fair local and parliamentary elections.\textsuperscript{30}

Some conservative voices in the American foreign policy community have hence come full circle – if Islamist groups can acquire power through not only explosive revolutions but also gradualist reform strategies, then the only way to prevent their ascent is to ban their participation in politics altogether. The irony here is stunning, because coercive police states that have successfully crushed Islamist challengers include Libya, Syria, and Saddam-era Iraq, which all rank among the most closed and repressive dictatorships in recent world history. Such a bizarrely illiberal stipulation cannot guide any future doctrine of democracy promotion. For one, placing artificial limitations on domestic political outcomes that no external actor can fully control weakens both the credibility and the utility of American democracy advocacy. It also rests on shaky academic ground. Scholars have argued that preemptively excluding Islamist groups from competitive elections and other vistas of political contestation only radicalizes them further, driving many towards violence and other extreme methods that would be unthinkable within inclusive democratic institutions.\textsuperscript{31}

Second, it sows intense anti-American sentiment amongst Arab publics. Nothing damages Washington’s reputation more than the perceived hypocrisy of U.S. officials who only champion democratic reforms if the beneficiaries happen to be moderate and pro-Western.\textsuperscript{32} Such duplicity also makes even the most dedicated Arab reform activists skeptical of the reliability of U.S. support: even if secular democrats do manage to wrest state power from today’s authoritarian incumbents, would Washington call for another episode of “democratization” if their policies ever divert from American interests?\textsuperscript{33} Perhaps, many have concluded, American policymakers only desire “Arab versions of Vladimir Putin—a pragmatic realist capable of cooperating with the United States while effectively managing popular discontent with American policies... a strong chief executive who firmly controls legislative initiatives and the direction of foreign policy while presiding over a regime that guarantees ample and broad individual liberties yet places controls over organizational freedoms.”\textsuperscript{34}
The Commitment Trap

The second obstacle haunting U.S. foreign policy in the Arab world reflects its historical quandary in dealing with strategically valuable but politically repugnant regimes. Throughout the Cold War, American and Soviet relations with authoritarian governments in much of the developing world often took the form of patron-client relationships. Such informal ties of mutual dependence revolved around an implicit *quid pro quo* agreement between the patron power and the client state: the superpower would support the stability and security of the weaker client, so long as that client regime served the superpower’s geopolitical interests.\(^\text{35}\) At the height of the Cold War, many repressive autocrats in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and the Middle East enjoyed the bounty of American patronage, pledging their cooperation in the struggle against communism in exchange for diplomatic support, economic aid, and military arms.

Yet although many analysts of U.S. foreign policy today portray the Cold War period as one of unquestioned sponsorship of authoritarian clients, in reality American policymakers struggled with the moral predicament of supporting despots whose grotesque human rights abuses clashed with democratic principles yet whose political survival was deemed vital to national security.\(^\text{36}\) Indeed, U.S. policy towards its autocratic associates constantly oscillated between “reformists” and “bolsterers.” Reformists argued for Washington to force its client regimes to embrace democratic changes (e.g., redistributive economic reforms, anti-corruption measures, relaxation of repression) not only for the sake of liberal ideals but also because such reforms could alleviate social unrest and political dissent; such views were notably associated with the Kennedy and Carter administrations.\(^\text{37}\) Bolsterers, as exemplified by the Eisenhower and Nixon administrations, argued against intervening in the internal politics of client states, and instead advocated that Washington reinforce the security of authoritarian allies with virtually unlimited channels of economic aid and military assistance. Such debates raged fiercest when leaders in pivotal clients—e.g., China in the late 1940s, Vietnam throughout the 1960s, Nicaragua and Iran in the late 1970s—faced revolutionary insurrections and hence called for increased American support. During these crises, bolsterers tended to dominate policy debates by arguing that imposing drastic reforms could generate short-term instability that would allow populist insurgencies and leftist forces to overrun these strategic outposts of Western influence. When they did manage to formulate policy, reformists found that they could not effectively bargain with dictatorial clients due to what one political scholar has called the paradox of the “commitment trap.”\(^\text{38}\)
Because U.S. policymakers had already promised long-term commitments of support, client autocrats knew their political survival held paramount value in Washington. Thus, American threats to withdraw support in consequence for noncompliance of reform demands were not credible, leaving the U.S. without the bargaining leverage necessary to induce its clients to perform democratic reforms that might have smoothed over revolutionary insurgencies.

That many students of contemporary international politics have forgotten these classic insights is not surprising. After all, the demise of the American-Soviet rivalry dissolved the clientelistic alliances that had structured much of the developing world, rendering historical discussions on patron-client ties largely meaningless. Further, the bolstering approach lost relevance as liberal reformists engineered the rise of democracy promotion strategies in American and European foreign policies during the 1990s; authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia found themselves without a superpower patron, and many wilted under growing international pressures to adopt democratic reforms. Yet while the fall of the Berlin Wall sparked hope in the Arab world that the newly victorious West would spread liberal democracy onto their region, the U.S. instead maintained its bolstering mentality in relations with Arab autocracies. Why? Washington still held its central geopolitical interests of preserving Israel’s security, accomplished partly through the Egyptian and Jordanian peace accords and partly by deterring other Arab states from aggression, and protecting Persian Gulf oil reserves for which Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf kingdoms were linchpins. Policymakers believed that such assets would be endangered if a groundswell of turbulent democratization washed away the region’s secular, predictable autocrats in favor of extremist, reactionist regimes. Moreover, such interests endured in the post-Cold War era because while the collapse of the Soviet Union lifted Washington’s geopolitical burden elsewhere, more domestic political and economic concerns shaped American thinking in the Arab world. National policymakers and the powerful lobby groups that influenced them still worried about Israel’s security against a backdrop of Arab hostility and Palestinian violence; with memories of the early 1970s all but forgotten, American consumers and industries were still highly dependent on Middle East oil.
Against this backdrop, the post-September 11 democratization project can be seen not as a unique historical process, but rather as a cyclical turn in the foreign policy wheel, a reformist impulse that crashed against the unyielding demands of the bolstering status quo. As was the case during the Cold War, the commitment trap prevented American policymakers from brandishing any credible threat of withdrawing support when pressing autocratic allies to embrace reforms. The Egyptian case is instructive. From 2002 through 2005, the State Department and White House were able to squeeze only marginal liberalization concessions from President Mubarak, such as a temporary expansion in press freedoms and the release of some political prisoners. The regime brazenly ignored or rejected more assertive suggestions regarding the omnipresence of state repression, suffocating restrictions on opposition parties, and other levers of internal control. Washington could have punished such noncompliance by reducing its massive foreign aid flows. Since 1979, the U.S. has paid close to $60 billion in economic and military assistance to Cairo, mostly in the form of annualized unrequited grant aid. Experts familiar with the Egyptian political economy know all too well how such exogenous grants have played a vital role in sustaining the fiscal stability and coercive apparatus that underlies the regime. Because these support payments were formulated in the late 1970s as a political reward for Egypt’s peace treaty with Israel, they represent sacred cash cows mostly immune to democratic considerations. Thus even if the Muslim Brotherhood’s electoral gains had not frustrated democracy promoters in November 2005, the Mubarak regime would have easily fended off further external pressures — just as, during the Cold War, stubborn dictatorial clients like Chiang Kai-Shek in China, Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam, Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire, the Somoza dynasty in Nicaragua, and Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi in Iran routinely shrugged off American reform demands and paid virtually no price in terms of Washington’s commitment to their stability and security — which, in any case, ultimately proved insufficient in insulating them from massive social revolutions.

The recurring commitment trap underscores an enduring paradox in international politics: authoritarian regimes that are highly dependent on foreign powers for their political survival can exercise a far greater degree of influence over their hegemonic patrons than their diminutive status would indicate. In the contemporary case, the U.S. has once again discovered that it cannot oblige democratic reforms upon its autocratic clients when their political survival is intricately tied to irreducible strategic interests. The priorities of safeguarding Israel’s security and regional energy supplies dominate American foreign policy calculations in the Arab world, and they continue to require the maintenance of stable, friendly autocracies willing to facilitate
those interests. Especially for longtime U.S. allies like Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, no other hard-line option would compel compliance with reform demands more than the threat to withdraw American support; but for senior officialdom in Washington, no other threat remains so categorically off the negotiating table.

Conclusion

Despite its recent failures, the ambition to “enlighten” the authoritarian regimes of the Arab world with democracy promotion will probably survive the current presidential administration if neoconservative discourse is any indicator. As this analysis suggests, however, two issues will haunt future efforts to foster democratization in the region. An ingrained fear of Islamist electoral advances will inflict severe restrictions on the scope of political change tolerated by American policymakers. Likewise, Washington’s historical commitments to safeguard Israel’s security and protect regional hydrocarbon reserves will give its autocratic allies the unique capacity to defy the concerted efforts of a global hegemonic power to oblige political reforms. Such theoretical predicaments go beyond the operational criticisms commonly levied against democracy promotion tactics; indeed, they implicate the fundamental orientation and strategic interests of American foreign policy. Until these dilemmas are resolved, the U.S. will not be able to promote democracy effectively in the Arab world.

-Y-Pauline Hilmy and Claire Morelon served as lead editors for this article.

NOTES

1 The author refers here to those 16 Arab countries traditionally covered under the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. The Palestinian Territories are also included.


4 Bush (op. cit.) 2003.


7 For instance, “A Middle East pacified, brought into compliance with American ideological norms, and policed by American soldiers could be counted on to produce plentiful supplies of oil and to accept the presence of a Jewish state in its midst.” Andrew J. Bacevich, “The Real World War IV,” The Wilson Quarterly 19:1 (2005): 36-61.


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In fact, annual efforts by the House of Representative since July 2004 to withhold part of Egypt’s $1.3 billion military aid disbursement pending the enactment of democratic and security reforms have been repeatedly stymied by the Bush administration.
