U.S. Democratization Efforts in the Broader Middle East

by Lisa Curtis

The political upheavals that have swept across the Middle East over the last four years, even though motivated largely by a desire for more representative government, have paradoxically made it more difficult for the U.S to effectively support democratic development in these countries. While the internet and social media have raised peoples' expectations about how they want to live in their societies and about the kind of political freedoms they expect from their governments, the vast majority of the civil societies in these countries are ill-equipped to facilitate a transition from authoritarian to democratic rule.

The chaotic developments have been accompanied by the flourishing of Islamist political movements throughout the region and the dramatic rise of the self-identified Islamic State (IS) that has brought with it new levels of terrorist brutality and depravity.

The U.S. cannot stand by idly as the region faces cataclysmic changes. The U.S. must develop a coherent set of policy principles to address the new challenges and use aid and other diplomatic tools to promote democratic ideals and practices in these transitioning states, even as events move rapidly and the outcomes are increasingly unpredictable.

Evolution of U.S. Democracy Promotion

The administration of former President George W. Bush (2001-2009) affirmed its support for democracy building in the Middle East shortly after the September 11, 2001, attacks. United States officials adopted the view that promoting democracy was essential to countering the ideologies of Islamist extremists and, thus, to countering global terrorism. The Bush administration established the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) in 2002 to bolster civil society and rule of law, empower women and youth, improve education, encourage economic reform, and increase political participation through direct aid to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), educational institutions, local governments, and private businesses. The creation of MEPI was a far-sighted and strategically important step in promoting democracy in a pivotal region of the world.

The overall impact of efforts to rebuild societies in Afghanistan and Iraq after the U.S.-led invasions of these countries is more questionable. In Afghanistan, the U.S. poured billions of dollars in reconstruction assistance into the country that has helped improve quality of life indicators and established a politically freer society. However, as numerous U.S. investigations have revealed, a great deal of this assistance has been wasted—either siphoned off by corrupt Afghan officials or misallocated by U.S. defense and USAID contractors.[1]

In Iraq, the Bush administration erred in underestimating the significance of the sectarian divide as well as the enormity of the task of rebuilding and stabilizing the country following the U.S. invasion.

In its first year of office, the administration of President Barack Obama distanced itself from the Bush administration's policy of democracy promotion in the Middle East.[2] Obama's cautiousness stemmed from his desire to dissociate from Bush's policies in Iraq, which had relied, in part, on the promotion of democracy in

the Middle East as justification for regime change. Obama's reluctance to support Iranian democracy activists in 2009 further fed the perception that his administration was reversing the decades-old bipartisan policy of promoting and defending democracy as a core component of U.S. foreign policy.

By mid-2010, however, the Obama administration started to reaffirm U.S. commitment to standing up for democracy throughout the world. In the National Security Strategy published in May 2010, it stated that, "The United States supports the expansion of democracy and human rights abroad because governments that respect these values are more just, peaceful, and legitimate."[3]

In his 2010 speech to the United Nations General Assembly, Obama said, "Experience shows us that history is on the side of liberty; that the strongest foundation for human progress lies in open economies, open societies, and open governments." He continued, "America will always extend our engagement abroad with citizens beyond the halls of government… And it is time to embrace and effectively monitor norms that advance the rights of civil society and guarantee its expansion within and across borders."[4]

Similarly, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in a speech in October 2010, emphasized that the U.S. had a unique responsibility to champion democratic values throughout the world. She talked about the need to construct an international "architecture of values" to counter repression and extend freedom and emphasized the need to challenge authoritarianism that stymies civil society and pluralism, declaring that "democracy needs defending."[5]

Despite its initial reticence to talk about democracy promotion, the Obama administration has maintained a fairly consistent commitment to foreign aid programs focused on building democratic institutions. The FY2016 State Department budget request designates $442 million for democracy and governance programming in the Middle East and North Africa; this represents an 8.8 percent increase over the FY2015 request, but a 10.6 percent drop from the FY2010 level of $495 million.[6]

In the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq, however, the Obama administration has fumbled the military strategies. The goal should have been to ensure that the U.S. left behind substantial residual forces in each country to help keep the peace until the local security forces could contain terrorist threats on their own. Instead, President Obama has focused single-mindedly on leaving a legacy of being the President that ended two wars. This has led the White House to allow an agreement for keeping forces in Iraq beyond 2011 to fall through and to draw down U.S. forces from Afghanistan too quickly.

The task of championing democracy abroad has been severely complicated by the chaos following the revolutions in the Middle East over the last four years and by the U.S. interest in suppressing IS, which stormed the world stage a little over a year ago after it seized large swathes of territory in northern Iraq.

The U.S. is less willing to challenge authoritarian regimes that oppose IS and has less diplomatic band-with and resources to engage in democracy promotion because of the immediate security concerns in countries like Iraq, Syria, and Libya. A poll released in June 2014 by Zogby Research Services concluded that "there is a sharp decline in confidence that the United States is committed to democracy across the Middle East."[7]

Rise of Islamist Parties

Another complicating factor in promoting democracy is the rise of Islamist political parties following the democratic revolutions in the region. Countering the illiberal agendas of Islamist parties should remain a key component of U.S. foreign policy in the region. But the support for Islam-based identity parties and interest among the Muslim polities in seeing Islam play a greater role in the governing and political structures of their respective countries is undeniable. U.S. officials must accept that Islamism represents a powerful political ideology that is unlikely to burn out or fade away any time soon.[8] Indeed, most Muslim-majority countries currently have legal systems that look both to *sharia* (Islamic law) and secular civil regulations as sources of law.

Based on polling in countries where large majorities of Muslims favor governing systems that include both democratic and Islamic values and practices, it is likely that most Muslim-majority countries will not place the same emphasis on separation of religion and state as Western countries did during their transitions to democracy. The polling shows that most respondents in Muslim-majority countries want neither a theocracy nor secular democracy.[9] They prefer a third option in which democratic values and religious concepts co-exist.

Western observers tend to believe that democracy can only succeed if there is a strict separation between religion and state. But as John Owen points out in his book, *Confronting Political Islam*, liberal democratic development in the West was influenced by both secular and religious concepts, including Catholic conceptions of natural rights and Calvinist ideas of covenant.[10]

One of the fundamental questions with which analysts continue to grapple is whether participation in electoral politics leads Islamist parties to moderate their agendas and develop a greater commitment to democratic principles related to constitutionalism, equality, and pluralism.

Many see Islamism as a direct threat to democracy and view it as a long-term social transformation project designed to make Muslim communities fearful and, thus, easier to control.[11] They would equate Islamism

with totalitarianism and would hold up the 2012 rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as confirmation of their view.

Meanwhile, Middle East scholars like Fawaz Gerges argue that the most effective means to deal with Islamism is not less democracy but more liberalization. Gerges asserts that nourishing a vibrant civil society levels the playing field and provides the best counterweight to Islamists.[12]

Other Middle East scholars like Farid Senzai and Farhan Bokhari conclude that the democratization process is influencing the Islamists and that they no longer have the luxury of talking about Islam and democracy in the abstract.[13] They are compelled to take advantage of democratic openings, yet at the same time, they are helping to determine the way in which democratization is unfolding in their societies. These scholars make a strong argument that democratization in the Middle East will not follow a western template and that religion will undoubtedly play a role in these countries' democratic development.

Policy Recommendations

So how should the U.S. move forward with promoting democracy amidst the unsettled democratic transitions throughout the region, rise of Islamist politics, and escalating violence from terrorist groups like IS? While there is no one-size fits all strategy, there are a few guiding principles for the U.S. to follow. Moving forward the U.S. should:

• Support civil society groups and assist them in organizing and networking to strengthen their political voices. The success of Tunisia's transition to democratic rule demonstrates the important role of a robust and active civil society. It is encouraging that in the FY 2016 budget, the administration has doubled the bilateral aid request for Tunisia to $134 million, including for democracy and governance.

• Encourage a comprehensive and consensus-based constitutional development process as part of the transition to democratic rule. Tunisia's emphasis on developing consensus and taking time to fully debate fundamental governance issues while creating its new constitution was integral to the success of the process. Writing a constitution is not merely a formality or technical process but a way to bridge ideological differences among various political parties. While the U.S. does not have a role to play in defining those debates, it can facilitate the process for resolving them.

• Insist that political parties firmly shun all forms of violence. If Islamist leaders want to participate in electoral politics, they must distance themselves from the violent agenda of terrorists of all stripes.

• Keep pressure on militaries to stay out of civilian politics. The militaries in countries like Egypt and Pakistan continue to play significant roles in the politics and governance of their countries. While these militaries have on some occasions helped to preserve stability by intervening in times of crisis, this role should be limited and temporary.

• Prioritize improved rights and economic opportunities for women. According to recent studies, there has been progress in female education, declines in fertility rates, and improvements in life expectancy in the Middle East, but indicators such as women's economic participation and political empowerment continue to lag. The entry of women into the labor force is a key step in economic and social development, as seen in the case of Bangladesh. Women's rights movements in Morocco and Tunisia also have been credited with the high rates of female labor participation in these countries.

• Discourage governments from shutting down non-violent, law-abiding Islamist parties. While there should be demands that the Islamist parties adhere to democratic principles and reject the use of violence, Washington should discourage countries from shutting Islamists out of the political process altogether. If the Egyptian military completely cuts off the Muslim Brotherhood's ability to participate in politics, there is a greater chance the group will go underground and engage in violence. There are similar concerns about the Bangladeshi Jamaat-e-Islami party that has been targeted by the Sheikh Hasina government through death sentences handed down by a War Crimes Tribunal.

• Make religious freedom a central component of democracy promotion efforts. The mistreatment of religious minorities in Muslim-majority countries is well documented, especially in places like Pakistan where misuse of anti-blasphemy laws is rampant.

• Avoid assuming that elections alone ensure that a country is on the path to democracy. When evaluating a country's level of democratization, the U.S. needs to monitor institutions that are responsible for overseeing the electoral process, the structure of the political parties themselves, the level of media freedom, the independence of the judiciary, and checks on executive power. One crucial element of maintaining societal freedoms is to ensure that the judicial system remains independent and that no religious entity has the final say on legal questions.

• Develop ways to assess the impact of U.S. democracy promotion activities to better focus efforts. For instance, one study by Chatham House revealed that U.S. rhetoric was as important as programming.[14] This

effort should involve assessments of the local environments to determine which actors are having the most impact and where there is a need to build capacity.

- Lastly, focus on long-term engagement and accept there is no quick way to establish democracy.

Conclusion

Promoting democracy and liberty around the world has long been a core component of U.S. foreign policy. Now, more than ever, the U.S. needs to develop creative ways to promote democratization in the Middle East. As conservative foreign policy commentator Robert Kagan recently put it:

Today, as always, democracy is a fragile flower. It requires constant support, constant tending, and the plucking of weeds and fencing-off of the jungle that threaten it both from within and without. In the absence of such efforts, the jungle and the weeds may sooner or later come back to reclaim the land.[15]

Lisa Curtis analyzes America's economic, security and political relationships with India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and other nations of South Asia as a senior research fellow at The Heritage Foundation.

Notes:

[1] There are numerous reports and investigations detailing U.S. aid wastage in Afghanistan on the website of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) at https://www.sigar.mil/.

[2] Lisa Curtis, "Championing Liberty Abroad to Counter Islamist Extremism," *Heritage Backgrounder* #2518, February 9, 2011, at http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/02/championing-liberty-abroad-to-counter-islamist-extremism.

[3] Ibid.

[4] The White House Office of the Press Secretary, *Remarks by the President to the United Nations General Assembly*, September 23, 2010, at https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/09/23/remarks-president-united-nations-general-assembly.

[5] Hillary Rodham Clinton, "A Conversation with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton," remarks at the Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, D.C., September 8, 2010, at http://www.cfr.org/world/conversation-us-secretary-state-hillary-rodham-clinton/p34808.

[6] Stephen McInerney and Cole Bockenfeld, "The Federal Budget and Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2016: Democracy, Governance, and Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa," Project on Middle East Democracy Report, May, 2015, p. 5 at http://pomed.org/pomed-publications/fy16-budget-report/.

[7] "Five Years After the Cairo Speech: How Arabs View President Obama and America," Zogby Research Services, June 2014, at http://b.3cdn.net/aai/04651e9aa1b5dcc741_3wm6brd3d.pdf.

[8] Lisa Curtis, Charlotte Florance, Walter Lohman, James Phillips, "Pursuing a Freedom Agenda Amidst Rising Global Islamism," *Heritage Special Report*, November 17, 2014, at http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2014/11/pursuing-a-freedom-agenda-amidst-rising-global-islamism.

[9] "Most Muslims Want Democracy, Personal Freedoms, and Islam in Political Life," Pew Research Center Global Attitudes Project, July 10, 2012, at http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2012/07/Pew-Global-Attitudes-Project-Arab-Spring-Report-FINAL-Tuesday-July-10-2012.pdf.

[10] John M. Owen IV, *Confronting Political Islam: Six Lessons from the West's Past* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 127.

[11] Zeyno Baran, "Engaging with Muslim Communities around the World," testimony before the Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, February 26, 2009, at http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/BaranTestimony090226p24.pdf.

[12] Curtis, "Championing Liberty Abroad to Counter Islamist Extremism."

[13] Kamran Bokhari and Farid Senzai, *Political Islam in the Age of Democratization* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), p. 190.

[14] Nicole Bibbins Sedaca and Nicolas Bouchet, "Holding Steady? U.S. Democracy Promotion in a Changing World," Chatham House, February 2014, at https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/home/chatham/public_html/sites/default/files/170214DemocracyPromotion.pdf.

[15] Robert Kagan, "Is Democracy in Decline? The Weight of Geopolitics," *Brookings Institute Journal of Democracy*, January 2015, at http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2015/01/democracy-in-decline-weight-of-geopolitics-kagan.