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# The Strategic Implications of Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Middle East

CHRIS ZAMBELIS

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The expansion of democracy in Europe, Latin America, and East Asia over the last 30 years has spurred extensive debate on the internal and external factors that facilitate political reform. In this context, many observers view the greater Middle East and Islamic world as an anomaly in that authoritarian rule continues to dominate, albeit in varying degrees. The spread of democracy elsewhere set in motion internal reforms that contributed to greater openness and multiparty competition in the Middle East during the 1990s. Ultimately, the drive toward more substantive reform was cut short, as incumbent leaders did not risk endangering their positions by embarking on genuine democratization processes.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the end of the Soviet threat, US relations toward the Middle East continued to be driven by Cold War calculations. Supporting and guaranteeing the security of friendly autocratic regimes to ensure access to the region's energy resources and favorable pricing mechanisms, containing the rise of regional powers with the potential to threaten US interests, deterring aspiring powers such as a revamped Russia, China, and even Europe from gaining a foothold in the region, supporting Israel as a surrogate of US power and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, nonproliferation, Islamic radicalism, and terrorism took precedence over all else.

In contrast, Washington paid scant attention to the question of democracy in the region—or lack thereof—adopting a markedly different ap-

proach compared to its engagement of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, Latin America, East Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. This posture exemplifies the ongoing dilemma facing American Presidents of whether to subordinate realist-based interests to Washington's democratic ideals.

The 9/11 tragedy forced Washington to reevaluate its posture toward the region. The attacks amplified the threat of international terrorism unlike ever before and highlighted the deep-seated anger, frustration, and resentment harbored by millions of Muslims and the extreme lengths to which a minority of radicals would go to further their cause. Rooting out and killing terrorists everywhere emerged as a pillar of America's post-9/11 national security strategy.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Draining the Swamp***

In addition to initiating an aggressive strategy that attacks terrorists and their sponsors, the Bush Administration determined that the long-term defense of the American homeland rests on draining the pool of recruits available to organizations such as al Qaeda by eliminating the conditions that breed extremism.

Washington attributes the spread of Islamic radicalism to the persistence of authoritarianism in the Middle East. It acknowledges that the status quo in the region is illegitimate, unacceptable, and unsustainable, given the failure of incumbent autocratic regimes to address social and economic problems and meet the basic demands of their citizens. As a consequence, the issues of reform and democracy were elevated to a level of critical importance.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, the Administration reversed a pillar of American policy predicated on the notion that pro-US authoritarian regimes served to protect against radicalism and terrorism. Traditional US policy toward the region was meant to ensure stability and enhance American security. The 9/11 attacks proved the opposite. Indeed, promoting democracy has become a strategic imperative in the Bush Administration's war on terrorism.

This strategy marks a dramatic shift from longstanding American policy, at least in rhetoric. Washington is accustomed to dealing with compliant authoritarian regimes in places such as Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan,

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and Saudi Arabia, all staunch allies that flout public opinion when it comes to maintaining close ties to the United States.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, citizens in democracies can think and act freely in that they can question their leaders and hold them to account without fear. This is an important distinction when we consider the potential power of public opinion in a region where American credibility has reached alarming lows.<sup>5</sup>

Given this context, it is worth exploring what a democratic Middle East would mean for US interests. The Bush Administration has declared that it is committed to promoting democracy in the Middle East. But democracy is not without risk, and the spread of democracy does not guarantee the continuation of friendly ties with old allies or stability. For example, until only recently, US ties with India, the world's most populous democracy, were marked by tensions and rivalry.<sup>6</sup> The new democracies of the former Eastern bloc looked to NATO and the European Union for guidance, inspiration, and support. Despite a number of initiatives, no such model exists for the Middle East.

American support for Muslim democracies would require the free expression of dissonant voices; otherwise they would be labeled illegitimate. Public opinion polls suggest that Arabs and Muslims in general do not take issue with American or Western values or freedom, but instead are infuriated over American policy toward the region—namely, longstanding support for authoritarian regimes and the US stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Iraq.<sup>7</sup> In fact, Muslims want democracy.<sup>8</sup> But will Washington stand for democratically elected governments that are Islamist, nationalist, or openly hostile to the United States and its allies?

Democratic transition processes are often beset by setbacks, stagnation, and instability. The experiences of Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, and Spain illustrate that democracy does not guarantee that a society can eliminate terrorism.<sup>9</sup> Does Washington have a realistic view as to what the future holds? Most important, is it prepared to navigate this process?

A detailed examination of the US decision to oust Saddam Hussein and attempt to remake Iraq into a democracy by force is beyond the scope of this analysis. The military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan before that are central to President Bush's strategy of promoting democracy in the region. Washington asserts that both countries can inspire reform.

This article is concerned, rather, with the long-term strategic implications of a democratic Middle East for US interests. Promoting democracy in the Middle East will mark a positive shift in American foreign policy if and when Washington decides to back up its rhetoric with action. At the same time, the political and foreign policy orientation of traditional allies in the region may change dramatically with the advent of democracy, at least in the early stages. These shifts will have far-reaching implications for the US posi-

tion in the region. This article also highlights some of the inherent risks in this strategy and obstacles Washington is likely to face as it goes down this road.

This analysis is not about whether Islam and democracy are compatible. The argument that Islam is inherently undemocratic or that Muslims do not want democracy is wrong. It is worth noting that over half of the world's Muslims live and thrive in democracies.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, numerous democratic opposition movements struggle under repressive conditions in the Islamic world. Although their aims and methods differ from mainstream reformers or moderate Islamists, even some of the most radical extremists adopt the language of democratic activists when highlighting the authoritarianism, corruption, and incapacity of the regimes in question because it resonates with their target audience.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Democratization vs. Liberalization in the Middle East***

Before going further, it is important to lay out a theoretical framework outlining the ideas of democracy, democratization, and liberalization as they apply to Middle East politics, because each has implications for US strategy. In a few words, democracy consists of more than just free, competitive, and regular elections. According to Larry Diamond, freedom of expression, association, and press, an independent judiciary, a functioning legislature, the rule of law and due process, a military and security apparatus that is apolitical and constitutionalist, and the protection of human and civil rights all comprise the basic framework of a liberal democracy.<sup>12</sup> Democratization signifies a move toward greater degrees of political participation in existing governmental systems. In essence, it enhances the collective freedom of the citizen vis-à-vis the state, especially in terms of the public's ability to participate in and influence the government.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast, liberalization can mean any reform that enhances the individual freedom enjoyed by a citizen. The relaxation of press censorship or public association laws, or a limited economic privatization scheme, can qualify as liberalization.<sup>14</sup> Political liberalization differs markedly from democratization, since it has little to do with enhancing the public's ability to directly participate in government. Instead, it expands the space of participation in the public sphere.

Liberalization can and often does occur in authoritarian systems without leading to a democratic transition. Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* reforms are an example of liberalization. The numerous *infitah* (open door) economic policies instituted by Egypt, Syria, and Tunisia can be characterized as liberalization.<sup>15</sup> Many countries in the Middle East—including Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria,

Tunisia, and Yemen—have instituted far-reaching political and economic reforms that include multiparty elections on the local and national levels.

In the Middle East, political liberalization has traditionally been part of a regime-driven survival strategy. In this sense, liberalization is an attempt by the ruling power to defuse or preempt social, economic, or political crises to offset popular dissatisfaction with the government. The fall of the Soviet Union and the transitions to democracy in the developing world, the triumph of free-market economics, as well as expanded access to modern communications and information (globalization) also make it harder for authoritarian regimes to justify their existence. These trends contribute to what Michael Hudson calls a “demonstration effect” that made its presence felt long before Washington’s push to promote democracy in the region.<sup>16</sup> In other words, democracy has become the only game in town.

This partly explains the imposition of sham elections or referendums of “national confidence” in Egypt under President Hosni Mubarak, Tunisia under President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Uzbekistan under President Islam Karimov, and even Iraq under Saddam Hussein. Authoritarian regimes in the Middle East are not unique in this regard. President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus stages sham votes to bolster his credibility in the face of international criticism.<sup>17</sup> Although the jury is still out, many observers suggest that the 2005 elections in Iraq and Palestine and the displays of “people power” in Lebanon emboldened reformers in the region and have placed more pressure on the incumbent regimes to implement reforms.

### ***Democracy Strategy in Practice***

President Bush unveiled the US-Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) in late 2003 to promote political, economic, and education reforms, women’s rights, and support for civil society.<sup>18</sup> Washington went one step further with its Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI) in the run-up to the June 2004 G-8 summit.<sup>19</sup>

The GMEI was based on the idea that the pool of disenfranchised individuals in the Middle East threatens the G-8 by providing a base of recruits to terrorist organizations and fostering instability. In supporting its case, the plan drew from the much-publicized 2002 and 2003 United Nations Arab Human Development Reports.<sup>20</sup> The draft proposal drew skepticism in Europe and outrage in the Arab capitals. European and Arab leaders were concerned that the plan served to unilaterally impose Washington’s will on the region.

Egyptian President Mubarak resisted the plan: “We hear about these initiatives as if the region and its states do not exist, as if they had no sovereignty over their land.”<sup>21</sup> A joint Egyptian-Saudi announcement declared that

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the Arab world is “progressing on the road to development, modernization, and reform, but in a way that is compatible with the needs, interests, values, and identities of their peoples.”<sup>22</sup> The Jordanian Foreign Minister at the time, Marwan Muasher, echoed this stance by stressing the need for a local reform process instead of one imposed from abroad.<sup>23</sup> All three countries are among Washington’s closest allies.

The opinion pages of regional media outlets generally mirrored these sentiments. The plan was touted as a form of neo-colonialism or as a way for the Bush Administration to deflect attention away from the ongoing insurgency and instability in Iraq. Some observers called it a pretext for future military interventions to force regime change in Iran and Syria.

Popular outrage toward the Administration’s plans demonstrates the deep-rooted credibility problem the United States faces in the Middle East. Muslims are highly skeptical about Washington’s ultimate intentions, given the long-standing US policy of supporting authoritarian regimes in the region. Arabs in particular find it hard to believe that the United States is serious about promoting freedom. They tend to view US support for self-determination and human rights as disingenuous in light of Israel’s ongoing occupation of Palestinian land and continued expansion of settlements on territory that Palestinians and the international community envision as part of a future Palestinian state—an issue that resonates deeply among both Muslims and Christians in the Middle East and one that cannot be wished away.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the US decision to oust Saddam Hussein by force confirmed regional perceptions of a militant America that is quick to use force against Arabs and Muslims to further its strategic objectives.

In the end, the G-8 members approved a scaled-down version of the initial US plan known as the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative (BMENAI). Unlike the GMEI, this initiative highlighted the need for a “just, comprehensive, and lasting settlement” to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in conjunction with a pledge of G-8 support for reform.<sup>25</sup>

Despite their initial resistance, key Arab leaders introduced a series of reforms in an apparent effort to placate Washington. The Arab League also

endorsed a reform agenda. President Bush upped the ante by singling out allies Egypt and Saudi Arabia to take the lead in ushering in an era of reform.<sup>26</sup> The plan seemed to work. Saudi Arabia held municipal elections, the first vote in decades. President Mubarak called on Egypt's parliament to amend the constitution to allow for challengers to compete against him in the next elections. He has ruled Egypt with an iron fist for over 24 years.

On the surface, these initiatives seem like real progress. However, the Saudi vote was restricted to Riyadh and a few other areas, with only half the seats of the municipal councils up for grabs. The remaining seats were filled by government decree. Women were denied the right to vote or to stand as candidates.<sup>27</sup> President Mubarak's reform pledge was also approved, but it did not account for the fact that potential candidates contesting the next elections must be members of official parties who have been sanctioned by parliament. This excludes the outlawed *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimeen* (Muslim Brothers), Mubarak's strongest rival, as well as other activists.<sup>28</sup> The *al-Haraka al-Misriyya min ajl al-Taghyir* (Egyptian Movement for Change), an umbrella group of activists that includes secular reformers and Islamists, also continues to face harassment in its drive to force Mubarak to step down.<sup>29</sup>

In the eyes of many local reformers, nothing has changed. In fact, democratic activists perceived Washington's cautious praise for Egypt and Saudi Arabia as a slap in the face and proof that the United States is not serious about pushing for genuine reform.<sup>30</sup>

### ***The Bumpy Road to Democracy***

The spread of democracy to the Middle East will likely be accompanied by serious setbacks and periods of instability. This instability will come in many forms and have important implications for US strategic interests in the region and the war on terrorism. It has the potential to transform the strategic landscape by contributing to the realignment of traditional alliances and the creation of new power blocs that will challenge the US position.

#### *Enter Political Islam*

The Bush Administration's vision for a democratic Middle East presupposes that emerging democracies will be friendly to Washington and be willing to continue relations on US terms. Although its rhetoric is mindful that democracy in the region will reflect local traditions and culture, Washington expects that pluralistic governments will be secular in outlook and open to market reforms. In reality, the spread of democracy does not guarantee that such governments will come to power. In fact, free elections will likely empower Islamists of various persuasions, most of which advocate populist agendas crit-

ical of US policy. There is also a danger that elections will elevate totalitarian or anti-American forces. Elections may even give rise to democracies that will forge closer ties to Russia, Europe, and China to offset US dominance.

Joel Beinin and Joe Stork define political Islam as a complex and heterogeneous trend that uses religious scripture and symbols to justify temporal and political causes.<sup>31</sup> Islamists run the gamut from moderate democratic reformers to radical extremists. Nevertheless, the United States has tended to perceive the resurgence of Islam in politics in geopolitical terms reminiscent of the Cold War—a trend that constitutes a monolithic bloc intent on antagonistic and even violent confrontation with the West. Ironically, during the Cold War, Washington saw Islamists as an effective counter against Soviet expansionism and Arab nationalism.<sup>32</sup>

The United States has traditionally been reluctant to press its Arab and Muslim allies on the issues of human rights and political reform based on the assumption that any democratic opening would threaten their pro-US orientation or lead to their replacement by something far worse. Algeria's tragic experience throughout the 1990s is often cited as an example of what will happen if and when Islamists win elections. On the other hand, the Algerian case is also seen as an example of what happens when authoritarian regimes shut out key segments of popular participation, in this case the Islamist opposition.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, the regimes in question have used these arguments as a pretext to justify their repression of internal dissent and requests for US economic and military aid.

Given the current circumstances, the advent of democracy in the Middle East will empower Islamists. For many reasons, Islamists represent the dominant form of political opposition in the Middle East. In general, the authoritarian regimes in question successfully rooted out secular-minded democratic opposition movements, often relying on repressive measures, including violence and torture, to maintain control.

Despite these harsh tactics, political opposition persisted in many forms. The regimes responded in kind by assassinating Islamist leaders and harassing their followers. The most subversive groups were outlawed while others were co-opted by the state in an attempt to fragment and weaken the opposition. These moves radicalized some Islamists and mainstream activists, forcing them to operate in the underground. The state also removed public arenas for association and debate. As a result, political life increasingly revolved around the mosque. Mosques came to serve as arenas for citizens to associate and voice grievances—spaces regimes had difficulty penetrating, even where the governments appoint religious leaders.

In addition, religious observance surged in the Arab world in the late 1960s and 1970s. Israel's invasion and one-sided defeat of Egypt, Syria, and

Jordan and subsequent occupation of Arab land in the 1967 War helped inspire this trend. The Arab defeat led many to second-guess the prevailing secular socialist pan-Arab nationalism advocated by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Arabs attributed their military loss and deteriorating social status to the Western ideologies they had adopted, namely nationalism and socialism.<sup>34</sup> The 1979 Iranian Revolution that saw the overthrow of the US-backed Shah, and the defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s, also contributed to the resurgence of Islam as a potent political force. Significantly, Osama bin Laden attributes the defeat of the Soviets to the mujahideen struggle in Afghanistan.<sup>35</sup>

The failure of successive governments in the Middle East to meet the demands of ordinary citizens is central to the Islamist ethos. The illegitimate, corrupt, and repressive nature of the regimes has driven disenfranchised Muslims to seek other options. In this sense, Islamists of all ideological persuasions are offering an alternative to what they perceive as an unjust status quo. Where they differ is in their methods and ultimate goals. It is in this context that political Islam emerged as the primary vehicle of social, political, and economic protest in the region.

Islamists are in the best position to exploit democratization today, and their entry into public life is inevitable given the lack of alternatives. The popular allure of Islamists stems from their effective politicization of grievances through the use of religious symbols and rhetoric. Islam essentially bolsters their legitimacy and resonates with the target population because it is an indigenous and authentic tradition.<sup>36</sup>

Most support for the Islamists does not stem from their religious credentials. On the contrary, Islamists back up their words with action. Many Islamist groups run effective social welfare programs and provide other services to compensate for the incapacity of the state. The most radical organizations use terrorism and violence against symbols of the regime and their Western benefactors.<sup>37</sup>

Despite their fundamental differences, Graham Fuller suggests that the agenda of many Islamists resembles those of traditional nationalist and populist parties. Like Islamists, nationalists and populists in the West and elsewhere call for the assertion of identity and revitalization of the community. Islamists lament the current circumstances where Arabs and Muslims find themselves and aspire to reinvigorate their societies. They also tend to be fiercely independent and suspicious of outside interference.<sup>38</sup>

Islamists also mirror nationalists in their vocal criticism of governments in the region. They frequently accuse leaders in the Middle East of compromising the interests of the nation in order to serve the West. Militants take up arms and use violence against symbols of the state. Even seemingly

random terrorist attacks that claim the lives of innocents are carefully calculated to attack the regimes where it hurts most. For instance, the 1997 attack that claimed the lives of 58 tourists in Luxor, Egypt, by the radical *Gammat al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Group) was an attack on a crucial source of the hated Mubarak regime's revenue: tourism.<sup>39</sup>

Given the populist credentials of Islamists, the rise of Islamist governments may transform the political and foreign policy orientation of traditional allies. This possibility should be of concern considering the credibility problem Washington faces in the region. As mentioned earlier, public opinion surveys demonstrate that America's poor credibility does not stem from a popular Arab and Muslim aversion to American culture and democracy. Instead, Muslims harbor deep resentments toward US foreign policy in the region.<sup>40</sup> Since democratic governments are by definition accountable to their citizens, public opinion will play an increasingly influential role in the political and foreign policy orientation of countries where Islamists dominate.

When Islamists come to power, they will likely act on their populist impulses, at least in the early stages of any transition.<sup>41</sup> For example, incumbent governments may place conditions on the continued presence of American military forces on their soil, but still keep dialogue open. Others may limit cooperation or abandon agreements governing security collaboration with Washington. It is also possible that democratic governments will cater to public opinion and demand that American forces vacate military installations altogether. It is no surprise that the new Shia-dominated Iraq has hinted at the need for establishing a timetable for the withdrawal of Coalition forces.

Other governments may reorient their foreign policies away from the United States and look to Europe, Russia, and even China or India. China has been active in cultivating closer ties to prominent energy producers in the region, namely Sudan and Iran, in order to secure energy sources to fuel its dynamic economic growth.<sup>42</sup> Beijing also has boosted security cooperation with Pakistan.<sup>43</sup> India is pursuing a similar strategy in the region.<sup>44</sup>

A popularly elected Saudi government may use its leverage in OPEC and demand that oil payments be made in euros instead of dollars, just as Saddam Hussein demanded payment in euros for Iraqi oil after the currency was introduced to world markets. Saudi Arabia might reorient itself as a strategic partner of emerging Asian powers such as China. Egypt could move to cut ties to Israel and sever longstanding security and diplomatic relations with the United States. These scenarios are ominous considering that Washington depends on Egypt and Saudi Arabia to ensure regional stability and to counterbalance Iran. A Jordan led by its majority Palestinian population may also cut ties to Israel. Indeed, most Jordanians label Jordan's peace agreement

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with Israel as a “peace of the palace”—referring to the royal family, and not a “peace of the people.”<sup>45</sup> Israel might exploit regional instability by taking preemptive action against its neighbors, engulfing the region into all-out war. Iran can enhance its position as the region remains in a state of strategic flux. Israel’s nuclear capabilities and Iran’s nuclear ambitions raise the stakes in any impending instability. This all could erase any possibilities for a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

These potential outcomes not only have important strategic implications for the US war on terrorism and tightening oil markets. They also affect America’s standing as a regional power in a region sure to remain of vital strategic significance in the 21st century.

The fiercely independent instincts of Islamists need not mean confrontation with Washington if and when they take control, however. Even Islamists with populist agendas will be forced to contend with the political realities of everyday governance. They will be put to the test and held to account, unlike their authoritarian counterparts that answered to Washington. This applies to Islamists of all ideological persuasions. In fact, there are many examples where Islamists are participating in concert with other groups in parliaments and other official functions.<sup>46</sup> In the long run, they will have to demonstrate progress in practical areas such as tackling unemployment, attracting foreign investment, and increasing economic growth. In this regard, they face many of the same challenges confronting political parties elsewhere. The realities of political life will moderate populist Islamist agendas down the road, forcing them to make concessions and compromise.

*The Transformation of Minority Politics*

It is imperative that Washington realistically account for the complexities inherent in its pursuit of a democratic Middle East, especially in authoritarian states divided along ethnic, sectarian, and tribal lines. According to Jack Snyder, democratization processes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union emboldened nationalists and other radicals to exploit nascent nationalist sentiments and other grievances. Extremists harnessed these feel-

ings to mobilize popular support for their destructive agendas. The result was interethnic and sectarian strife and the redrawing of borders in the former Yugoslavia and Caucasus.<sup>47</sup>

In some cases, elections accelerated this process, as nationalist platforms highlighting territorial claims and national myths dominated electoral politics. This does not mean that democratization is a recipe for violence and instability. Nevertheless, it is dangerous to presuppose a linear progression from authoritarianism to liberal democracy in the Middle East.

During any democratization process (or future “regime change” scenario) the ethno-religious minorities currently in power will lose out at the hands of majority communities that have experienced oppression at their behest. Likewise, democracy empowers disaffected minorities to speak out and assert themselves along ethnic, religious, or tribal lines. Democratization also may embolden formerly subjugated groups to lash out at their one-time oppressors. In a best-case scenario, this is a formula for manageable political instability. In extreme circumstances, it can mean internecine violence or even civil war.

In Iraq, the Sunni Arab minority dominated political life at the expense of the Shia Arab majority, Kurds, and other communities. Saddam’s ouster and the recent Iraqi elections have empowered Shia Arabs and Kurds. Both communities are set to reap the rewards of political power once out of their reach. Not surprisingly, ordinary Sunni Arabs worry about their future in a Shia-dominated Iraq, while traditional elites maneuver the new political space to salvage the influence they once had.

As the past recipients of privilege, Sunni Arabs fear becoming targets for revenge attacks at the hands of Shia Arabs or Kurds, especially as both groups come to dominate Iraq’s revamped security apparatus. It should be no surprise that a substantial segment of the Iraqi insurgency is comprised of Sunni Arabs, many with ties to the former regime and others who worry about being marginalized in the new Iraq. Iraq is an extreme case, but the postwar situation offers a glimpse as to what Washington can expect elsewhere in the region.

The emergence of a Shia Arab-dominated Iraq will reverberate among the world’s 130 million Shia Muslims, especially in the Arab world, where non-Arab Iran has tried to assume a leadership role with mixed results as the voice of Shia Muslims since the 1979 Revolution.<sup>48</sup> Shia Muslims are often treated as second-class citizens in the predominantly Sunni Muslim countries where they reside. For example, they are frequently attacked in Pakistan and Afghanistan by Sunni extremists, who view them as heretics.

Iraq’s reemergence as a center of Shia religious pilgrimage, theological thought, and political power will inspire minority Shia communities to

assert themselves throughout the Arab world. The Shia population in Saudi Arabia faces severe discrimination by the conservative Sunni Wahhabi fundamentalism of the royal family and the state-sponsored clergy. Shia Muslims comprise the majority in the Saudi Kingdom's oil rich Al-Hasa and Qatif regions. They also are among Saudi Arabia's poorest and most underserved communities, making them a potential point of tension that has grave implications for the future stability of the Kingdom.<sup>49</sup> The elevated role of Kurds in post-Saddam Iraq will have a similar effect in states where substantial Kurdish minorities face repression, namely Turkey, Iran, and Syria.

The Sunni royal family that runs Bahrain, home of the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, also presides over a majority Shia population. Despite an ongoing political reform process, a democratic opening in Bahrain can bring instability, threatening the security of the American military presence there. The Shia of Bahrain enjoy greater religious freedom than their counterparts in Sunni-dominated countries. At the same time, they endure widespread discrimination by the Kingdom's largest employers, including the government bureaucracy.<sup>50</sup> These nascent tensions erupted in violence in May 2004 between police and Shia demonstrators calling for the withdrawal of Coalition forces from the Iraqi holy cities of Najaf and Karbala.<sup>51</sup> Kuwait is also led by a Sunni royal family that presides over a sizable Shia minority that may become a point of tension in any future democratic opening.

The Palestinian question in Jordan is another potential source of instability in one of Washington's most important Arab allies. Palestinians make up between half and two-thirds of Jordan's population, yet the Hashemite royal family's power base is rooted in the Bedouins, who dominate the security apparatuses and bureaucracy. Many Palestinians are assimilated in Jordanian society and are loyal to Amman. King Abdullah's wife, Queen Rania, is even of Palestinian descent. Nevertheless, Palestinians face widespread discrimination in appointments to ranking positions in the military and government. Jordan is also home to 13 impoverished Palestinian refugee camps.

Jordan frequently represses expressions of Palestinian identity and solidarity with their kin in the Occupied Territories. The two communities also share a history of violence, including the conflict between Palestinian guerillas and the Jordanian army that led to the ouster of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Most Palestinians and others deeply resent Amman's collaboration with Israel in suppressing Palestinian nationalism in the West Bank and Jordan.

Jordan is home to a growing, albeit moderate Islamist opposition movement. The *Hizb Jabhat al-Amal al-Islami* (Islamist Action Front, IAF), the political wing of the Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brothers, and a host

of independent Islamists are represented in parliament. Jordan's Islamists are preoccupied with domestic social issues. At the same time, the IAF is becoming increasingly vocal on foreign policy. For example, the party called on Amman to decline cooperation with Washington on the issue of training Iraqi security forces.<sup>52</sup>

Syria also contains the ingredients for a turbulent transition to democracy. The minority Alawi-led elite that rules Syria presides over a majority Sunni Arab population, as well as other minorities. Like Iraq, Alawi solidarity coupled with clan- and tribal-based affiliations that transcend ethno-religious identities defines the ruling class. Nevertheless, the Alawi character of the ruling Baath Party in Damascus cannot be understated. Muslims typically regard Alawis as heretics, despite their claim to represent an extension of Shia Islam.

The state's use of repression and violence to eliminate challenges to its rule is also a source of deep resentment, especially among Sunni Arabs. In February 1982, Hafiz al-Assad ordered a massive military assault against the city of Hama, a purported stronghold of the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brothers. Syrian forces flattened the city. Sources estimate that anywhere between 10,000 and 30,000 of the city's residents were killed, including thousands of women and children.<sup>53</sup>

## ***Conclusion***

If Washington is sincere about closing the gap between its rhetoric and its policy, its drive to support democracy in the Middle East represents a welcomed shift in strategy. In doing so, the United States needs to bolster its credibility in the region.<sup>54</sup> As it stands today, Washington's ailing credibility will undercut its regional reform initiatives. A genuine effort to establish an independent, sovereign, and viable Palestine—in conjunction with a commitment to support real reform—will go far to enhance American prestige in the Islamic world and dispel the claims of skeptics and extremists regarding Washington's ultimate intentions. Official speeches praising the virtues of Islam and American democracy are way off the mark. In the end, action, not rhetoric, will win hearts and minds.

The initial stages of any reform process should concern Washington. The test will be how well the United States weathers the storm. If Washington reneges on its plan at the first signs of instability or a perceived threat, that would be a mistake. Incumbent leaders will surely attempt to counter pressures for change by highlighting threats of imminent chaos. Extremists with a tyrannical vision can also exploit democracy to attain power, only to abolish the democratic institutions that elevated them. Given the region's experience

with authoritarianism, it is unlikely that Arabs and Muslims will stand for such a move. Still, this may be enough to temper US calls for greater openness. The United States also depends heavily on cooperation in the war on terror with many of the same autocrats that President Bush has called on to liberalize. This dilemma will not go away any time soon. Indeed, Washington will be confronted with some tough choices in the years ahead.

#### NOTES

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