

Christina Cone
Smithtown High School West

Is Democracy Possible in the Middle East?
Structured Academic Controversy

Lesson Topic: Is Democracy Possible in the Middle East?

Audience/Grade: Advanced Placement World History, 10th grade

Time Frame: Two forty-minute class periods

Materials: Handouts, iPads/Access to Internet (optional)

New York State Standards:

Standard 2 – World History, Key Ideas 1, 2, 3, and 4

Standard 3 - Geography, Key Idea 1

Standard 4 - Economics, Key Idea 1

Standard 5 - Civics, Citizenship and Government, Key Ideas 1,3 and 4

Common Core Curriculum Standards:

Reading 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10

Writing 1, 2, 4, 8, 9, 10

Aim: Is Democracy Possible in the Middle East?

Objectives:

Students will be able to expand their content knowledge of the Middle East pre and post Arab-Spring

Students will be able to demonstrate reading comprehension

Students will be able to enhance use of evidence to support statements

Students will be able to apply decision-making and problem-solving skills

Students will be able to examine multiple perspectives

Students will be able to focus on social skills such as listening, respecting one another, and communicating clearly

Do Now:

Students will be asked to craft a thesis statement in the Change and Continuity Over Time model addressing the following statement:

"Analyze major changes and continuities in the political structures in the Middle East between 1900 and the present. Include specific evidence."

Procedure:***Day One:***

1. Various thesis statements will be shared and critiqued for both structural elements as well as factual elements.
2. Students will then be informed that they will be debating whether or not it is possible for democracy to succeed in the Middle East.
3. The teacher will explain the Structured Academic Controversy Model (*if this is new to the students*) or review the model if it has been practiced before. (Use the controversy handout to explain the steps)
4. Positions and pairs will be assigned (pre-chosen by the teacher based on a desire to mix gender and ability levels).
5. Students will work with their partners to prepare evidence to support their position (using the worksheet to write down information). Students will be given a packet of readings as well as a suggested video link to watch. (*I use iPads in the classroom so students can do additional research and view the videos*)

Closure/Homework:

Students are to continue reading, researching and preparing for the debate.

Day Two:

1. Students will partner up to compare notes and plan their debate.
2. Students will be informed as to which pair they will be debating and move their desks to be facing each other (knee to knee, eye to eye)
3. Students on one side will present their position using supporting evidence while the opposing side listens and takes notes.
4. Students with the differing viewpoint will present their position using supporting evidence while the opposing side listens and takes notes.
5. Students will then physically slide their desks away from the other pair and craft three challenging questions to ask of the other side.
6. Students will reconvene and pose their questions to one another.
7. Students will then be asked to slide away once again and switch roles. They will now be charged with the task of coming up with an argument to support the other side.
8. Students will reconvene again and now be advocates for the alternative position.
9. Students will then see if the four of them can come to a consensus on the debate topic.
10. Consensus statements will be shared with the whole class.

Closure/Homework:

Students are asked to complete a debate reflection sheet.

Assessment:

The teacher monitors and assesses student conversations.

The teacher can collect the debate preparation and controversy worksheet

Additional Idea - Students can be asked to write a complete CCOT essay on this topic

Resources Used:**Is Egypt About to Explode—Again?**

The intense volatility of the country's political and security conflicts

Eric Trager Jan 2 2014

The Atlantic

<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/01/is-egypt-about-to-explode-again/282762/>

3 Years After Arab Spring, Democracy's Future In Middle East Still Uncertain

By Dan Perry Oct 5, 2013

The World Post

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/05/arab-spring-democracy_n_4049414.html

**The secret history of democratic thought in the Middle East
Are constitutional ideals alien to the region? Not at all.**

By Thanassis Cambanis, August 18, 2013

The Boston Globe

<http://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2013/08/17/the-secret-history-democratic-thought-middle-east/dgy8n0Ode8Xk8AVoZLziXK/story.html>

Will U.S. Democratization Policy Work?**Democracy in the Middle East**

by Lorne Craner, Summer 2006, pp. 3-10

Middle East Quarterly

<http://www.meforum.org/942/will-us-democratization-policy-work>

Does Democracy Have a Future in the Middle East

Sean L. Yom

Program on the Middle East, Foreign Policy Research Institute

<http://www.fpri.org/multimedia/2013/11/does-democracy-have-future-middle-east>

Your Name _____

Group Members _____



Creative Controversy

Is Democracy Possible in the Middle East?

1. What is your assigned position? _____
2. Create a thesis statement to guide your argument – What will you prove? _____

3. **Research:** Utilize sources and organize what you've learned into a cohesive argument. Arrange the information into **subtopics** that can be used to help prove your argument.

a.
b.
c.
d.
e.

4. **Predict:** What do you think will be the opposing side's *best arguments*?

a.
b.
c.
d.

5. **Controversy Skills:** Focus on the following:

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| - I used facts to back up statements | - I was critical of ideas, not people |
| - I listened to others without interruption | - I tried to understand both sides |

6. **Present:** Plan how to advocate your position forcefully and persuasively:

- What role will each group member have?
- How will you start the debate?
- How will you address the controversy skills?
- What will be your final conclusion?

DURING THE DEBATE!



Notes from opposing group's argument:

a.

b.

c.

d.

Create three challenging questions for opposing group:

1.

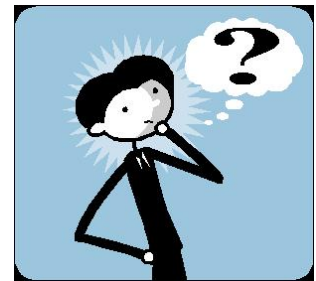
2.

3.

Surprise! Think of a new way to approach the argument. What can you add that hasn't been said?

Consensus: Can both groups come to a rational conclusion? If so, explain the group's conclusion. If not, explain what the major differences are that are blocking a consensus.

Name _____



Creative Controversy Reflection
Is Democracy Possible in the Middle East?

1. What was your assigned position? _____
2. What was your best argument to support your position? _____

3. What was the opposition's best argument? _____

4. Rank the group's performance in the following categories. (1=poor; 2=satisfactory, 3=good, 4=excellent)

Controversy Survey	1	2	3	4
Every member in the group actively participated				
The rules of rational argument were followed				
There was no winner or loser, only a successful exchange of ideas				
The group reached a cooperative consensus				

5. What was the consensus of the group? _____

6. Rank how well your group used the controversy skills. (1=poor; 2=satisfactory, 3=good, 4=excellent)

Controversy Skill	1	2	3	4
Used facts to back up statements				
Listened without interruption				
Critical of ideas, not people				
Tried to understand both sides				

7. Overall, what did you like or dislike about the creative controversy model of debate? _____

SUGGESTED SOURCES:

Is Egypt About to Explode—Again?

The intense volatility of the country's political and security conflicts

Eric Trager Jan 2 2014

The Atlantic

<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/01/is-egypt-about-to-explode-again/282762/>

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Nearly six months after the mass uprising-cum-coup that toppled Mohammed Morsi, the key cleavages of Egypt's domestic political conflict are not only unresolved, but unresolvable. The generals who removed Morsi are engaged in an existential struggle with the Muslim Brotherhood: They believe they must destroy the Brotherhood—by, for instance, designating it a terrorist organization—or else the Brotherhood will return to power and destroy *them*. Meanwhile, Sinai-based jihadists have used Morsi's removal as a pretext for intensifying their violence, and have increasingly hit targets west of the Suez Canal. Even the Brotherhood's fiercest opponents are fighting among themselves: the coalition of entrenched state institutions and leftist political parties that rebelled against Morsi is fraying, and the youth activists who backed Morsi's ouster in July are now protesting against the military-backed government, which has responded by arresting their leaders.

So despite the fact that Egypt's post-Morsi transition is technically moving forward, with a new draft constitution expected to pass via referendum in mid-January and elections to follow shortly thereafter, the country is a tinderbox that could ignite with any spark, entirely derailing the political process and converting Egypt's episodic tumult into severe instability. What might that spark be? Here are three possibilities:

1. A high-profile political assassination

While he may be as well-guarded as any top official, Egyptian Defense Minister (and de facto ruler) Abdel Fattah al-Sisi is squarely in the Muslim Brotherhood's crosshairs. He is, after all, the face of the coup that toppled Morsi, and he later called Egyptians to the streets to seek their "authorization" for a subsequent crackdown that killed more than 1,000 Morsi supporters.

The Brotherhood hasn't been shy in calling for his death. Brotherhood protests frequently feature images of Sisi with a noose around his neck for "treason," and the Brotherhood-backed Anti-Coup Alliance recently tweeted, "the people want the murderer executed," in an apparent reference to Sisi. Moreover, in December, a pro-Brotherhood website even reported excitedly (double exclamation points and all) that an assassination attempt against Sisi had already taken place, adding that Sisi was hastily flown to Saudi Arabia for treatment, where he refused to have his leg amputated so that he wouldn't have to retire from the military. (This was, of course, false.) And while the Brotherhood has been implicated in political assassinations previously, such as the 1948 murder of Prime Minister Mahmoud al-Nuqrashi, it is hardly the only or best-equipped organization that wants Sisi dead: The Egyptian general is currently overseeing a military campaign against Sinai-based jihadists, who attempted to assassinate Egypt's interior minister in Cairo in early September and have repeatedly attacked security installations, most recently in the Nile Delta city of Mansoura and governorate of Sharkiya.

If Sisi were assassinated, it would have two effects. First, the military would likely respond with an even more severe crackdown on the Brotherhood than the one that is already underway. This is precisely what

happened following a 1954 assassination attempt on Gamal Abdel Nasser that was blamed on the Brotherhood: thousands of Muslim Brothers were detained, tortured, and executed over the next two decades. Second, given the current expectation that Sisi will either run for president or act as the kingmaker, his assassination would catalyze intense competition among various security officials who would vie—directly or via proxies—for the presidency. This would further weaken Egypt’s already disjointed state, raising the prospect of even greater violence.

2. Protests and/or violence at polling stations

Egyptians are widely expected to approve the referendum of the new constitution in January—no referendum in Egyptian history has ever resulted in a “no.” But the Muslim Brotherhood and its allies reject the post-Morsi political process and are reportedly planning to thwart the plebiscite by protesting at polling stations and preventing voters from entering the booths. While one must take reports about the Brotherhood in the Egyptian press with a heavy chunk of salt, the organization’s statements in recent weeks comparing voting in the referendum to “participation in bloodshed” suggest that aggressive action is possible. And the fact that Egyptian security forces are planning for this possibility is hardly reassuring: Egypt’s notoriously brutal police would likely engage the obstructionists violently, and those areas in which Islamists are particularly strong might be able to hold off government forces for a while, as occurred in the Giza town of Kerdasa in September.

This sort of incident wouldn’t just delay the vote—it would reveal the transitional government’s weakness. This would encourage the Brotherhood to escalate its protest activities, and might also encourage the Sinai jihadists to escalate their attacks. Rather than moving quickly toward the next rounds of elections, Egypt would be headed toward persistent civil strife.

3. A major terrorist incident in the Suez Canal

In August, Sinai-based jihadists fired rockets at a Panamanian-flagged cargo ship passing through the Suez Canal. While the Egyptian military responded with a major ground offensive against the jihadists shortly thereafter and beefed up security along the canal, Egypt’s generals admit that the campaign in Sinai has proven much more difficult than they expected. Moreover, subsequent terrorist attacks against both military and civilian targets suggest that the jihadists are extremely determined and, at times, very well-armed: terrorists filmed themselves firing an RPG in Cairo in October, and an explosion outside a camp for security forces in Ismailia in December wounded 30 people.

A major attack on the Suez Canal would be particularly devastating. In addition to embarrassing the military-backed government internationally, it would harm the one source of domestically generated state revenue that has remained relatively stable despite the political tumult of the past three years. The current government can’t afford to lose it: Despite a \$12 billion pledge from Persian Gulf states in the immediate aftermath of Morsi’s ouster, Egypt’s cash reserves have declined in recent months—dropping from \$18.6 billion in October to \$17.8 billion in November. Meanwhile, the government has announced plans to increase the minimum wage for government employees and preserve the costly food-subsidy program. A sharp dip in Suez Canal revenue would affect the government’s ability to meet its obligations, and ongoing cash-reserve declines could spell the return of the constant blackouts and long gas lines that plagued Morsi during his final months in office. Mass anger, and the beginnings of a possible uprising, would likely follow.

There’s a slim chance, of course, that any of these particular scenarios will occur. But Egypt’s unsettled political situation and swell of violence make the atmosphere ripe for further upheaval. Something will likely give.

3 Years After Arab Spring, Democracy's Future In Middle East Still Uncertain

By DAN PERRY 10/05/13

The World Post

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/05/arab-spring-democracy_n_4049414.html



In this Wednesday, July 3, 2013 file photo, an opponent of Egypt's Islamist President Mohammed Morsi chants slogans during a protest outside the presidential palace, in Cairo, Egypt. (AP Photo/Khalil Hamra, File) | AP

CAIRO -- CAIRO (AP) — "For too long, many nations, including my own, tolerated, even excused, oppression in the Middle East in the name of stability... We must help the reformers of the Middle East as they work for freedom, and strive to build a community of peaceful, democratic nations." — President George W. Bush in a speech to the U.N. General Assembly, Sept. 21, 2004

Almost a quarter-century ago, a young American political scientist achieved global academic celebrity by suggesting that the collapse of communism had ended the discussion on how to run societies, leaving "Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government." In Egypt and around the Middle East, after a summer of violence and upheaval, the discussion, however, is still going strong. And almost three years into the Arab Spring revolts, profound uncertainties remain.

That became shatteringly clear on July 3, when Egyptian generals ousted the country's first freely elected president, Mohammed Morsi, installing a technocratic government in the wake of massive street protests calling for the Islamist leader to step down. He had ruled incompetently for one year and badly overstepped his bounds, they argued. A crackdown on his Muslim Brotherhood has put more than 2,000 of its members in jail and left hundreds dead, and a court has ordered an outright ban on the group. Although new elections are promised, the plans are extremely vague.

All this happened with strong public support, especially among the educated classes where one might expect a strong yearning for democracy. Foreigners in Egypt were frequently stunned at how little many Egyptians cared that Morsi had been democratically elected.

How could that be? Around the region people are asking the question, and the stirrings of a rethink, subtle but persistent, are starting to be felt.

Few people — not even the absolute rulers who still cling to power in some places — would openly argue against democracy as a worthy goal. And people bristle at any suggestion that the region's culture is somehow at odds with freedom. But with the most populous Arab nation having stumbled so badly in its first attempt, there is now an audience for those saying total democracy must grow from the ground up, needs time to evolve, and need not be the same everywhere.

"Democracy is not a matter of principle or faith for most people" in the region, said political scientist Shadi Hamid, director of research at the Brookings Doha Center. "It is something they believe in to the extent that it brings good results. ... If democracy does not bring those things, then people lose faith in the democratic process."

"That's part of the story in the past three years," he said. "When push comes to shove, many say, democracy is fine in theory, but is not actually improving our lives. If the generals can promise us a greater degree of security and stability, we prefer that instead."

Oil-rich Gulf countries, meanwhile, have largely avoided the Arab Spring as the wealthy ruling families offered what has essentially been a swap — generous handouts such as state jobs and discount-rate housing in exchange for political passivity. The exception is Bahrain, where an uprising has been led by majority Shiites seeking greater rights in the Sunni-ruled kingdom, which is home to the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet. Hamid, for example, is based in the Gulf state of Qatar, where no one expects democracy anytime soon. That's more or less the situation in the entire Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf area, where emirs and monarchs are for the most part firmly in charge. The same goes for Jordan, where officials offer learned explanations about democratic reforms that do not extend to relieving King Abdullah II of his executive power anytime soon.

"Most of the Arab rulers are trying very hard to give the impression to the West that their peoples are not prepared for democracy because these rulers are afraid that they are going to lose in any fair democratic elections," said Adel al-Baldawi, a history professor at Mustansiriyah University in Baghdad. The region's experiment with democracy in recent years actually precedes the Arab Spring. The Palestinians, under the framework of their interim accords with Israel, held a number of parliamentary and presidential elections beginning in the late 1990s. Iraq has had several democratic elections since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion that ousted Saddam Hussein — part of then-U.S. President George W. Bush's vision for democratizing the region.

Few in the region today seem willing to credit that "Bush Doctrine" in the least with the Arab Spring that erupted in December 2010. More often cited are the explosion of satellite TV news stations, social media and mounting anger at decades of authoritarian rule. In swift succession governments fell in Tunisia and Egypt. Libya's dictator, Moammar Gadhafi, was toppled — and killed by a mob — in a civil war. All three countries have tried to set up democracies, with elected governments. The results offer some cautionary tales.

Sectarianism and tribalism often override political debate — such as in Iraq, where Kurds, Sunnis and Shiites generally vote for their own parties. The violence-wracked country has ended up plagued by partisanship and political gridlock, its leader Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki accused by many of having authoritarian tendencies. Existing parties in Jordan are even more granular, with some representing tribes. Critics say a healthy democracy needs a contest of ideas instead.

Another challenge is the level of education in some countries. All over the world voters face a challenge in grasping the increasingly complex issues of the day — but the problem is on a different scale in a place like Egypt, where about a third of the almost 90 million people are illiterate. That provided a major opening to Islamists led by the Muslim Brotherhood, which successfully convinced many in Egypt's impoverished rural population that a vote for them was a vote for Islam. Critics saw an irony: Islamists, they argued, were great at using democracy for the ultimate goal of theocracy, non-democratic to the core.

In the Palestinian areas elections have been delayed for years and a split has set in between the West Bank's autonomy zones, run by an elected Mahmoud Abbas whose mandate has long expired, and the Gaza Strip, which was seized by the Islamic fundamentalists of Hamas, who make no democratic pretense today, although they did win parliamentary elections in 2006.

"Our Arab societies largely lack a democratic culture," said Majed Sweilem, a political scientist in the West Bank. "The democratic movements are weak and can't get to power. The only ones that can get to power are the undemocratic forces that don't believe in real democracy." Once in power, they can rule more or less at will, elections having lent legitimacy to an executive unencumbered by the basic infrastructure of democracy — the institutions, checks and balances that prevent a tyranny of the majority. That prospect terrified the elites in Egypt, where people are less traditional and many feared their lifestyle was under clerical attack.

Mohammed Magdy, a 27-year-old Egyptian, said the path to democracy would be long. "The ballot box is one of the means of democracy . but (it is) not everything. At a time when there is popular action, it is not the strongest tool for change, because there are other ways," he said — such as protests and public monitoring of officials.

There have been some calls for denying illiterate people the right to vote, although they have not gained traction.

In Syria, of course, an Arab Spring-like revolt has morphed into a civil war whose rebel side is sufficiently dominated by Islamic extremists that it has been unable to muster effective Western support against authoritarian President Bashar Assad, despite more than 100,000 people killed.

In the Arabian peninsula and the Persian Gulf, rulers seem determined to maintain things as they are. Most countries have taken only small steps to take politics beyond the ruling clans.

"If the Gulf leaders needed anything to justify their crackdowns on political dissent, they have a perfect self-justification in the chaos in Egypt and other countries hit by the Arab Spring," said Christopher Davidson, an expert in Gulf affairs at Britain's Durham University.

Fawaz A. Gerges, director of the Middle East Center at the London School of Economics, said that "unlike eastern Europe in the 1980s and 1990s," which clearly wanted to emulate the West, "the Arab world does not know where it wants to go."

Gerges warned against assuming "that this transition will lead to Western-type democracy."

Perhaps religion will play a formal role in some places. Perhaps monarchs will retain a hand in the executive. Perhaps certain ethnic groups will have positions reserved for them, as is the case in Lebanon, where the president is a Christian and the prime minister a Sunni Muslim.

Francis Fukayama — the political scientist who wrote "The End of History?" in 1989 — said he still believes democracy is the direction of things. But subsequent events have shown that the road is long, and cultural differences may apply.

"Democracy in Asia ... doesn't look like European democracy — there are going to be variants all around the world," the Stanford University fellow said in an interview. "I think people's expectations are too high for how quickly you can make a transition. The experiments we've seen (in the Middle East) have not worked very well, but they're also very real and these institutions just take a long time to evolve. Nationalism derailed democracy in the 20th century in Europe, (and) religion is playing a similar role in the Arab world right now."

"All of these places are going to look different, but they face a common set of challenges and there is a common evolutionary path."



Supporters of ousted President Mohammed Morsi protested at the Republican Guard building in Nasr City, Cairo.

The secret history of democratic thought in the Middle East

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Is democracy possible in the Middle East? When observers worry about the future of the region, it's in part because of the dispiriting political narrative that has held sway for much of the last half century. The conventional wisdom is that secular liberalism has been all but wiped out as a political idea in the Middle East. The strains of the 20th century—Western colonial interference, wars with Israel, windfall oil profits, impoverished populations—long ago extinguished any meaningful tradition of openness in its young nations. Totalitarian ideas won the day, whether in the form of repressive Islamic rule, capricious secular dictatorships, or hereditary oligarchs. As a result, the recent flowerings of democracy are planted in such thin soil they may be hopeless.

This understanding shapes policy not only in the West, but in the Middle East itself. The American government approaches “democracy promotion” in the Middle East as if it's introducing some exotic foreign species. Reformists in the Arab world often repeat the canard that politicized Islam is incompatible with democracy to justify savage repression of religious activists. And even after the revolts that began in 2010, a majority of the power brokers in the wider Middle East govern as if popular forces were a nuisance to be placated rather than the source of sovereignty.

An alternative strain of thinking, however, is starting to turn those long-held assumptions on their head. Historians and activists are unearthing forgotten chapters of the region's history, and reassessing well-known figures and incidents, to find a long, deep, indigenous history of democracy, justice, and constitutionalism. They see the recent uprisings in the Arab world as part of a thread that has run through its story for more than a century—and not, as often depicted, a historical fluke.

The case is most clearly and recently laid out in a new book called “Justice Interrupted: The Struggle for Constitutional Government in the Middle East” by Elizabeth F. Thompson, a historian at the University of Virginia, who tries to provide a scholarly historical foundation to a view gaining traction among activists, politicians, and scholars. Thompson sees the thirst for justice and reform blossoming as long as 400 years ago, when the region was in the hands of the Ottoman Empire. In the generations since, bureaucrats, intellectuals, workers, and peasants have seized on the language of empire, law, and even Islam to agitate for rights and due process. Though Thompson is an academic historian, she sees her work as not just descriptive but useful, helping Arabs and Iranians revive stories that were deliberately suppressed by

political and religious leaders. “A goal of this book is to give people a toolkit to take up strands of their own history that have been dropped,” Thompson said in an interview.

Not everyone agrees with her view: Canonical Middle Eastern history, exemplified by Albert Hourani’s 1962 study “Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age,” holds that liberalism did flourish briefly, but was extinguished as a meaningful force in the early years of the Cold War. Even today Hourani’s analysis is invoked to argue that there’s no authentic democratic current to fuel contemporary Arab politics.

But Thompson’s work resonates with a host of Middle Eastern academics, as well as activists, who are advocating new forms of government and who see their efforts as consistent with local culture and history. It may offer a way out of the pessimism gripping many Arab political activists today, finding connections between apparently disparate reformist forces in the region, and political ideas that are often seen as irreconcilably opposed. Most intriguing, she finds elements of this constitutional liberalism even within fundamentalist Islamist movements that democratizers most worry about. These threads suggest a possible way forward, a way to build a constitutional, democratic consensus on indigenous if often overlooked traditions. Islamists and secular Arabs, it turns out, have found common ground in the past, even written constitutions together. The same could happen again now.

No one, including Thompson, would claim that democracy and individual freedom have been the main driver of Middle Eastern politics. Before World War I, almost the entire region lay under the dominion of absolute monarchs claiming a mandate from God—either the Ottoman Sultan, or the Shah of Iran. Later, Western colonial powers divided up the region in search of cheap resources and markets for their goods.

Yet lost in this history of despots and corrupt dealers is a long stream of democratizing ideas, sometimes percolating from common citizens and sometimes from among the ruling elite. In the 19th and 20th centuries, western countries were beginning to move away from authoritarian monarchies and toward the belief that more people deserved legal rights. During this same time period in the Middle East, a similar conversation about law, sovereignty, and democracy was taking place, encompassing everything from the role of religion in the state to the right of women to vote.

Although authoritarian governments largely won the day, Thompson argues that the story doesn’t end there: Instead, she weaves together a series of biographies to trace the persistence of more liberal notions of Middle Eastern society. She begins with an Ottoman civil servant named Mustafa Ali who, in 1599, wrote a passionate memo exhorting the Sultan to reform endemic corruption and judicial mismanagement, because injustices were causing subjects to revolt—thus making the empire less profitable.

From 1858 to 2011, a series of leaders—most of them politicians and also prolific writers—amassed substantial public followings and pushed, though usually without success, for constitutional reforms, transparent accountable governments, and the institutions key to a sustainable democracy. Thompson was surprised, she said, to find the case for liberal democracy and rights in the writings of Iranian clerics, Zionist Jews, Palestinian militants, and early Arab Islamists.

With support from the Maronite church, a group of Lebanese peasants formed a short-lived breakaway mountain republic in 1858, dedicated to egalitarian principles. The blacksmith who led the revolt, Tanyus Shahin, insisted on fair taxation and equal protection of the law. His followers took over the great estates and evicted the landlords, but their main demand was for legal equality between peasants and landowners.

An Egyptian colonel named Ahmed Urabi led a revolt against the Ottoman ruler in 1882, inaugurating a tradition of mass revolt that had its echo in Tahrir Square in 2011. Urabi in his memoir recounts that when

the Ottoman monarch dismissed his demands for popular sovereignty in their final confrontation, Urabi replied: “We are God’s creation and free. He did not create us as your property.” Decades later, in 1951, Akram Hourani rallied 10,000 peasants to resist Western colonialism and local corruption in Syria. Eventually, he and his followers in the Baath Party were sidelined by generals who turned the party into a military vehicle.

Some of the stories that Thompson tells are less obscure, like those of the founders of modern Turkey—the one sizable Islamic democracy to emerge from the former Ottoman empire or the Iraqi Communist Party, which had its heyday in the decade after World War II, and whose constitutional traditions remain an important force today even if the party itself is almost completely irrelevant. Perhaps most encouragingly, in a region known for clashes of absolutes, she finds an encouraging strain of compromise—in particular in the early 20th century, when secular nationalists negotiated with Islamists in Syria to hammer out a constitution they could both support. It was swept aside when France took over in 1923.

“The Middle East is going to see these crises in Tahrir and Taksim and Iran until it can get back to a moment of compromise, which existed a hundred years ago with Islamic liberalism, where you can have your religion and your democracy, too,” Thompson said.

Thompson said she was surprised to find support for constitutionalism and due process in the writings of Hassan El-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, and even Sayyid Qutb, the ideologue whose writings inspired Al Qaeda. They believed that consensual constitutions could achieve even their religious aims, without disenfranchising citizens who opposed them.

Some of the characters in this tale have largely vanished to history. Others remain hotly contested symbols in today’s politics. The name of Halide Edib, a feminist and avatar of Turkish nationalism in the early 1900s, is still invoked by the governing Islamist party as well as its secular critics. In Egypt, which enjoyed a period of boisterous liberal parliamentary politics between the two world wars, activists today are trying to revive the writings of early Islamists who believed that an accountable constitutional state, with rights for all, would be better than theocracy.

In Thompson’s view, this world did not simply vanish: It lives on in contemporary Arab political thought, most interestingly in Islamist politics.

It’s easy to assume that religiously driven movements are all antidemocratic—and indeed, some have proven so in practice, like the ayatollahs in Iran or the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. But Thompson offers a more nuanced view, showing that many of these religious movements have internalized central elements of liberal discourse. The Muslim Brothers wanted to dominate Egypt, but they attempted to do so not by fiat but through a new constitution and a free-market economy.

Princeton historian Max Weiss says his own study of the Levant backs Thompson’s central argument that constitutionalism thrives in the Middle East: For more than a century, a powerful contingent of thinkers, activists, and politicians in the region have embraced rule of law, constitutional checks and balances, and liberal economics. Even when they’ve lost the political struggles of the day, they’ve remained active, shaped institutions like courts and universities, and provided an important pole within national debates.

For those in power, “constitutional” government can often be used as a fig leaf: Nathan Brown, an expert on Islamism and Arab legal systems at The George Washington University, observes that leaders like the monarchs in the Persian Gulf have often wielded constitutions as just another means of extending their

absolute rule. And they're not alone: Egyptian judges, Syrian rebels, and Gulf sheikhs often use law and constitution to "entrench and regularize authoritarianism, not to limit it," he says.

But among the people themselves, there is a longstanding hope for the rule of law rather than the rule of generals, or of imams. Knowing this history is important, Thompson argues, because it establishes that democracy is a local tradition, with roots among secular as well as religious Middle Easterners. Reformers, liberals, even otherwise conservative advocates for transparency and human rights are often tainted as "foreign" or "Western agents," imposing alien ideas on Middle Eastern culture. This slur is especially potent given the West's checkered history in the region, which more often than not involved intervention on behalf of despots rather than reformers.

Even if democracy is far from winning the race, its supporters can take courage from how many Middle Easterners have demanded it in their own vernacular. As Thompson's book demonstrates, it's very much a local legacy to claim.

Will U.S. Democratization Policy Work?

Democracy in the Middle East

by Lorne Craner

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After 9-11, the Bush administration concluded that decades of U.S. support for non-democratic leaders in the Middle East led not to stability but rather contributed to terrorism.[1] While U.S. government support for democracy promotion is not new, such sustained attention and allocation of resources marks a new emphasis on democratization.

Because of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, too often critics misconstrue U.S. democratization policy as military in focus. During the past quarter century, over eighty countries have become democracies, yet only in five of them—Grenada, Panama, Serbia, Afghanistan, and Iraq—did U.S. military intervention play a role.[2] These examples and the post-World War II experiences of Germany and Japan demonstrate that democratization can occur through use of force, but it is not the preferred or prevalent method. Washington's primary commitment to Middle East democratization support remains in the realm of coordinated diplomacy and international programs.

Democracy support is a long-term investment, but when coupled with diplomatic commitment, it works. Critics of this policy need only look to Chile, El Salvador, South Korea, Taiwan, Georgia, or Ukraine, countries where U.S. administrations patiently employed democracy policies for seven to ten years before the "overnight" victories of citizens against entrenched regimes. In all of these countries, regional experts counseled that, for various cultural reasons, democracy could not take root, and realists counseled that democracy should not take root.[3]

With the exception of Israel, Middle Eastern states have experienced decades of undemocratic practices with deeply entrenched personalities whose interests are inimical to reform. With the end to the "democratic exception" in U.S. policy goals for the region, the Bush administration has committed Washington to be as supportive of accountable and representative governance in the Middle East as it is elsewhere.

Building on the experiences of Middle Eastern countries that had already begun to open their systems, the Bush administration sought to work at the grassroots level by encouraging U.S. nongovernmental organization (NGO) partnerships with local reformers. Diplomats amplified these efforts by emphasizing to host governments the importance to Washington of democratic change. The strategy has already borne fruit. Regional reformers, such as Saad Eddin Ibrahim of Egypt,[4] who saw little hope in the past decade, now believe that meaningful political reforms can take hold. Important—although sometimes only symbolic—steps toward expanded democratic participation have occurred in countries such as Kuwait, Bahrain, and even Saudi Arabia. In reaction, longtime U.S. allies with less than democratic systems such as Egypt and Tunisia have sought to counter the shift in Washington's priorities on democracy and human rights.

Washington's Rationale

In the months after 9-11, there was a debate within the administration over democracy and human rights policy. Some senior and mid-level officials saw the attacks as the end of a decade-long period in which America was not threatened and could therefore afford the luxury of not being concerned with the internal practices of other nations. The shock of 9-11, they hoped, would diminish the diplomatically inconvenient

issues of human rights and democracy. Others, many of whom had served in the Reagan administration, drew parallels between the 1980s and a post-9-11 world. In the 1980s, they believed, the U.S. success was in part due not only to stating what America stood against—communism—but also in enunciating a counter vision of democracy and freedom. Some in the Reagan administration also had viewed democratization as a weapon with which to roll back the Soviet Union.[5] In the Philippines in 1986, and Chile two years later, democratization also became a tool to ensure that once autocratic allies did not fall prey to Soviet-backed revolutionaries. Democratization was not the only method of ensuring a U.S. Cold War victory, but it was an important part of a broader strategy.

National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice signaled the beginning of a resolution to the debate just a week after the attacks. "Our values matter to us abroad. We are not going to stop talking about the things that matter to us—human rights, religious freedom and so forth and so on. We're going to continue to press those things,"[6] she said at a news conference. Secretary of State Colin Powell later added, "We have a vision of a region where respect for the sanctity of the individual, the rule of law, and the politics of participation grow stronger day by day." [7] Other administration officials also restated the importance of human rights and democracy in U.S. diplomacy in general and to the Middle East in particular.

Bush ended the debate when he placed democracy and human rights in the context of the war on terror in his January 2002 State of the Union Address. While media attention focused upon his formulation of an "Axis of Evil," more consequential was his statement of the importance of democratization for the region:

America will always stand firm for the nonnegotiable demands of human dignity: the rule of law; limits on the power of the state; respect for women; private property; free speech; equal justice; and religious tolerance. America will take the side of brave men and women who advocate these values around the world, including the Islamic world.[8]

Such a statement marked the first time a U.S. president talked so prominently about human rights in the Muslim world.

Within the State Department, a group of officials in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs and the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor was already working to implement the president's words more concretely. During 2002, the two bureaus combined resources to spend or commit US\$29 million for programs to advance democracy in the Middle East.[9]

When Bush spoke at West Point in June 2002, he drew clear parallels between the Cold War and the post-9-11 world:

The war on terror will require resolve and patience; it will also require firm moral purpose. In this way our struggle is similar to the Cold War. Now, as then, our enemies are totalitarians, holding a creed of power with no place for human dignity. Now, as then, they seek to impose a joyless conformity, to control every life and all of life. America confronted imperial communism in many different ways—diplomatic, economic, and military. Yet moral clarity was essential to our victory in the Cold War. When leaders like John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan refused to gloss over the brutality of tyrants, they gave hope to prisoners and dissidents and exiles, and rallied free nations to a great cause.[10]

The December 2002 creation of the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) furthered the U.S. democratization agenda. In unveiling the program, Powell explained, "Any approach to the Middle East that ignores its political, economic, and educational underdevelopment will be built upon sand." [11] MEPI sought to effect change by funding pilot projects, such as an election assistance program in Jordan and a program to monitor Yemeni parliamentary elections. The willingness of governments to allow such funding in their countries signaled a tangible willingness to permit the advance of their democracies. This shifted focus from traditional government-to-government aid programs and, instead, emphasized smaller grants to smaller NGOs. Despite claims by some commentators that the U.S. government is obsessed with

electoral—as opposed to liberal—democracy, MEPI's list of grantees reflects an emphasis on civil society, judicial and media reform, and enfranchising women.

The largest portion of the MEPI budget supported political programs to strengthen democratic processes, create or expand public space for critical democratic debates, strengthen the role of free media, and promote the rule of law to ensure government accountability. The State Department tailored these programs to account for both local needs and the art of the possible. For example, it brought student leaders from countries such as Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, and Saudi Arabia to Purdue, Notre Dame, George Washington University, and the University of Delaware[12] and supported parliamentary training in Morocco for recently-elected politicians as that country's political system began to open to a region-wide effort for judicial and legal reform.[13] Because "countries cannot succeed as democracies if more than half of their population is denied basic democratic rights,"[14] MEPI also seeks to improve women's rights in order to increase women's economic independence and participation in governance.

After initial start-up programs developed largely by MEPI staff, the office faced mid-life problems because of an increasing reliance on U.S. embassy staff and host governments for program recommendations. Many grants awarded during this period were benign. They brought little or no risk to the host government and did not do enough to advance democratization. There was a selection bias toward programs benefiting Arab governments, as opposed to those focusing on the civic sector. This reflected the traditional dilemmas of many diplomats who, on one hand, might agree with the necessity of reform, but on the other, are reluctant to do anything to disrupt their relationships with senior government officials. MEPI has since checked this tendency by deploying its own staff—including many foreign service officers—on long-term assignments to the region in which they can seek out local partners and NGOs independent of the U.S. embassy.

Critics say that MEPI programs are too small and scattered to fulfill U.S. policy goals for the region. But MEPI alone is not meant to be the entirety of policy. Diplomatic follow-up can amplify MEPI's effectiveness. Some elements of the bureaucracy within the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have been too slow to reflect the new emphasis on democracy and human rights promotion. A consistent message across the U.S. foreign policy apparatus including its embassies overseas will ensure a smoother transition toward democracy.

Any question that a U.S. commitment to democratize the Middle East had waned was put to rest with Bush's January 2005 inaugural address[15] and his subsequent speeches provided more definition to his approach. Noting problems faced by countries from Slovakia and Georgia to Iraq and Afghanistan, the president stated,

No nation in history has made the transition from tyranny to a free society without setbacks and false starts. What separates those nations that succeed from those that falter is their progress in establishing free institutions. So to help young democracies succeed, we must help them build free institutions to fill the vacuum created by change.[16]

In coming months and years—regardless of whether a Republican or Democrat is in the White House—there will be greater focus upon institutional reforms in those countries which have already begun their transformations. In countries such as Libya, Syria, and Tunisia that lag behind in democratization, U.S. policymakers will emphasize outreach and empowerment of civil society.

Democratization policy continues to evolve. In response to criticism from some Middle Eastern leaders that democratization imposed from the outside could not work,[17] the Bush administration launched the Fund for the Future. The fund is a joint venture between Western and regional governments on one hand and the private sector on the other. Its goal is to support "indigenous reformers to draw upon their ideas and their ideals to nurture grassroots organizations that support the development of democracy" with

grants to build civil society, strengthen the rule of law, and ensure greater opportunity for health and education. However, the fund's planned 2005 launch at the Forum for the Future summit in Bahrain failed to produce a formal agreement due to Egyptian demands that only government-sanctioned NGOs be eligible. Such a condition, reflective of the strategy of many regional governments to create a class of government-operated NGOs, would derail promotion of independent civil society.

The Consistency Debate

Many hurdles remain to democratization. Critics of U.S. policy complain about interference and conspiratorial motives. Some U.S. opponents of democratization say that U.S. pressure actually backfires. Evidence suggests the opposite. Take Egypt: while anti-American rhetoric flows through the streets of Cairo, and Egyptian officials may complain bitterly at outside interference, there is no doubt that Washington's pressure has worked. Egyptian party leaders and other activists say that U.S. pressure helped enable passage of a constitutional amendment to permit multiparty presidential elections. Washington also pushed successfully for domestic monitors to enter polling sites and a broader mandate for judges in election oversight.[18]

Egyptians watch U.S. actions and policy statements closely. When Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice canceled her scheduled visit to Cairo in response to opposition candidate Ayman Nour's January 2005 arrest, his supporters rejoiced.[19] Her stance drew a red line for Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and encouraged others to fight for democratic reform. Rice's subsequent speech at the American University in Cairo outlined democratization goals for Egypt:

The Egyptian government must fulfill the promise it has made to its people—and to the entire world—by giving its citizens the freedom to choose. Egypt's elections, including the parliamentary elections, must meet objective standards that define every free election. Opposition groups must be free to assemble, and to participate, and to speak to the media. Voting should occur without violence or intimidation. And international election monitors and observers must have unrestricted access to do their jobs.[20]

Such talk was unprecedented in a relationship long marked by diplomatic niceties and billions of dollars per year in aid. It was a turning point for many Egyptians who began to feel that the U.S. government was sincere if it would call to task its closest ally in the Arab world.

However, Rice's words highlighted the dilemma of public consistency versus private diplomacy. When public statements and actions requiring those elements of free elections did not follow her words in the following months, there was palpable frustration among political parties and NGOs. They felt that Washington had allowed other interests to take center stage. While back-channel discussions as to the priority and importance of the freedoms of choice outlined by Rice at American University continued, there was no public expression of U.S. anger, so many Egyptians assumed the United States had forgotten its promises. Cynicism is bred when any constituency detects a divergence between rhetoric and reality. This makes imperative greater public diplomacy to explain transparently U.S. policy in the region. For example, for decades USAID's Egypt program was unique in that the host government's approval was required for democracy projects. It was a courtesy historically extended to the Egyptian government because of Cairo's participation in the Middle East peace process. USAID now no longer seeks Egyptian government approval for its grants. It can now support Egyptian organizations with an explicit focus on democracy without Mubarak's blessing. In spring 2005, it awarded its first million dollars in grants to local Egyptian NGOs under these new procedures.[21]

The new procedures in Egypt also show the importance of the U.S. Congress in the debate. Pressure to bypass the Egyptian government in grant awards occurred after U.S. congressmen questioned conditions on financial assistance to Egypt. Some members called for across-the-board cuts, others demanded more spending on democracy and less on the military, and still others proposed linking payments to specific

benchmarks. When different branches of departments and agencies within the U.S. government forward a consistent message, the chances for progress are greatly increased.

The Instability Issue

Even as the U.S. government fine-tunes its policies, many foreign policy commentators and pundits second-guess the wisdom of democracy promotion. Leon T. Hadar, a research fellow at CATO, argued in the wake of the Danish cartoon controversy that "liberal democracy ... is not an export commodity."[\[22\]](#)

Some see the recent election results in Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, and the West Bank and Gaza as a setback for the U.S. administration's agenda of promoting democracy. They argue that holding elections too soon can undercut democratization, empower illiberal forces, and promote instability. In Iraq, ironically, many commentators argue that Washington did not push elections fast enough.[\[23\]](#)

Washington did not push elections in Egypt, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Authority. The polls had long since been scheduled. What the Bush administration did was insist that the elections be fair. The elections did empower Islamists. But many polls suggest that a portion of the Islamist vote in Egypt and the Palestinian Authority was more a sign of frustration with the status quo and anger at corruption than an endorsement of Islamism. Both the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hamas in the West Bank and Gaza juxtaposed an aura of cleanliness against the established elites' corruption. One poll showed that the attitude of the Palestine Liberation Organization and Hamas toward Israel was only the fifth-most important issue among Palestinian voters as they headed to the polls. Reform of corrupt governing institutions, improved internal security, improved economic conditions, and the promotion of democracy ranked higher.[\[24\]](#)

U.S. policymakers are not pleased with the rise of groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, but President Bush's willingness to recognize the election results should silence skeptics of U.S. commitment to democratic reform. After the Hamas victory, regional critics would have difficulty maintaining the theory that democracy promotion is meant to install puppet regimes. That said, as with the case of Hamas, accepting the result of a democratic election does not signal U.S. endorsement of the resulting regime. Winning elections does not alone create democrats. Even with long established democracies, U.S. relations ebb and flow depending on who is elected.

Democracy advocates would argue that rather than back down from democracy promotion, U.S. policy must focus more on securing a level playing field to enable moderate political leaders to emerge. In Egypt, civil opposition parties performed poorly in recent parliamentary elections precisely because the government used quarter-century old emergency laws to restrict their ability to operate and communicate to voters. While autocrats silence liberals, Islamists maintain a platform through the mosques. Washington should not use fear of Islamist forces to justify regime efforts to limit genuine political competition. Washington should react to Islamist gains in Egypt with renewed effort to create a legal and institutional framework to allow equal competition for liberal forces. Elections will occur in Morocco, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman in late 2006 and 2007 regardless of U.S. actions. Greater U.S. engagement, though, could mitigate the outcome.

Conclusion

Despite the setbacks and adjustments, there is cause for optimism about the ability of democracy to take root in the Middle East. There were many changes underway in the region even before 9-11. The region is changing fast and often for the better. Women now have the right to vote in Kuwait. Observers can monitor multiparty elections in Egypt. Popular protests in Lebanon led to the end of Syrian occupation. The first elected parliament in more than three decades took office in Afghanistan.

Five years ago, reform in the region was limited to monarchies in the region such as Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Morocco.[25] Liberals across the Middle East can increasingly advocate for additional democratic practices. Today, there are only a handful of truly repressive countries. Here, it is important for U.S. policy to keep fledgling political opposition from being silenced. President Bush did not create reformers, but his policies have, on one hand, encouraged them and, on the other hand, prevented autocrats from suffocating them. There is no longer a taboo of speaking about democratic reform in the Middle East. After seven years of U.S. democratization efforts, it will be difficult to again allow a "democratic exception" for the region.

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