US–Arab Relations in the Era of ‘Democracy Promotion’

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Reflections on Field Research in the United States and the Arab World: 9 Jan–26 Feb 2008

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Political reform in the Arab world, and the much publicised efforts on the part of the US to support it, have run aground. In the wake of the invasion and occupation of Iraq, the so-called Cedar Revolution in Lebanon, and stirrings in Egypt, Algeria, the Gulf and elsewhere, autocratic regimes appear to not only have staved off challenges to their rule, but further entrenched their authority. This article, based on the findings of a lengthy field-work trip in early 2008, outlines how these regimes demonstrate a highly resilient form of political control, a mechanism of rule that has ironically been enhanced by the policy of democracy promotion pursued by the US since 2002. In particular, it is the understanding of democracy and democratic development that exists within US democracy promotion agencies, the focus on institutional strengthening and process over challenging the informal power of the state, that has enabled this policy to be exploited by regional autocracies.

Disciplining the Democracy Promotion Debate

In 2007, Associate Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh of the NCEIS, Professor Amin Saikal of ANU, Professor James Piscatori also of the ANU via Oxford and myself were awarded a four-year Australian Research Council Discovery Grant to examine the impacts of US democratisation policy on the Middle East and Central Asia. As the post-doctoral fellow for the project, I was charged with leading the research component of the project with a particular focus on the ‘Arab experience’ in this relationship.

A core element of the research was a two-month fieldwork project, an effort to survey key decision-makers in Washington and, primarily, to discuss with Arab political, social and economic leaders how they saw the significant changes emanating from the United States affecting them. This was an exciting prospect, an opportunity to engage with both analysts and policy-makers from Beirut, Amman, Damascus, Cairo, Algiers, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Chicago, Washington, New York and Paris on one of the most prominent and divisive political issues of our time.
Being involved in these debates, I came to the project with a series of preconceptions I thought I may be able to mitigate prior to conducting the research. One, in particular, was foremost in my mind as I formulated the key research themes for the interviews; namely, suspicion over the motives of the current US administration. I had voiced concerns in both the academic discourse through various publications as well as in the public debate through the media about the sincerity of the current US administration in its stated aims of a fundamental priority shift in the way it deals with the Arab world. Specifically, its efforts to distance itself from previous administrations and their largely uncritical support of non-democratic regimes across the region. Instead, Bush & Co. claimed that they would no longer tolerate the continued pervasiveness of authoritarian and autocratic regimes in the Arab world; indeed, their existence was a threat to US national interests as it bred the very resentment that led to such events as 11 September.

Building on this, I sought to draw motivation from what I saw was the notable absence, or at least ‘muted-ness’, of Arab voices in the debate. Discussions (including the many rhetorical arguments) have abounded in relation to Bush’s foreign policy in the Arab world, amplified enormously by the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq. Despite this, there is little evidence that much has been done to listen to how this policy has affected the very people it is designed to assist. This is a criticism on all sides of the debate, and one where I thought this research could make a real contribution.

Those in the Arab world who were kind enough to speak to me highlighted a frustration with the political situation across the region. There are some genuinely positive encounters with US ‘democracy promotion’ policy and many negative ones also. Overall, there is a mixed record. However, what is most troubling is that there is little optimism to be had about genuine political reform in the Arab world; such is the resilience, innovation and flexibility of the authoritarian and autocratic regimes. Therefore, the agents of political reform face a difficult future, but one that may be enhanced, even in the smallest way, as long as we continue to make the effort to listen and respond.

There is little optimism about genuine political reform in the Arab world

What resonated prior to the trip, however, and what stands in starker relief now, is the dilemma facing those both inside and outside Arab political systems in efforts to promote reform. Political institutions across the region are hollow, they serve largely to buttress the informal mechanisms of power Arab autocracies use to maintain their rule. In this regard, the general consensus is that change must come from within. However, local agents for reform in Arab states are far from able to effect change on their own due to decades of direct repression, subtle manipulation and international neglect.

Many do desire external assistance and were quite open with me about their want to strengthen relationships with reform and democracy promotion agencies not only in the United States but also in the European Union, United Nations and elsewhere. Indeed, most require this assistance in terms of sourcing funding, assisting with coordination and training, as well as keeping the spotlight on the
continued political restrictions in Arab states. This necessary external assistance is an easy source of ammunition for Arab regimes to exploit, particularly in the current international climate, as a means to act against agents for change if and when they emerge as real threats to their hold on power—a classic catch 22.

**Ploughing water**

As a point of background, US democracy promotion policy is run through a series of agencies, the most prominent of these being the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), which is based in the Near East Affairs Bureau of the State Department, the G8-hosted Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) Partnership Initiative that is run out of the White House but includes input from G8 states, the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) that administers democracy assistance funding to countries across the globe, as well as initiatives run out of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), Freedom House and many other organisations.

In terms of the functionality of these agencies, a frustration that was expressed to me by a leading State Department official was that there has been a ‘lack of differentiation of goals’ in terms of US efforts to promote political reform in the Arab world by the Bush administration. Everything is presented as a priority in the administration’s rhetoric, a need to get everything done on every issue at the soonest possible point. When confronted with the realities on the ground, statements on the ‘need for more time’ did not match the pressure placed on policy organs to produce outcomes. Therefore, it was hard for those crafting and implementing the policy to design a workable program or to match the expectations of the administration, breeding frustration and resentment.

This resentment spilled over into open hostility not only between the usual suspects, namely the think-tanks of various ideological guises, but between agencies and individuals. Charges were laid that USAID was ‘horribly bureaucratic’ and ‘dominated by liberals’, where MEPI was ‘driven by an irrational ideological agenda’ from the White House, or that the work of the administration’s key agencies such as MEPI or the BMENA process were hamstrung by ‘dead-wood careerists’ at the State Department.

It was this hostility and, indeed, dysfunctionality between the agencies that were supposed to be working in the same direction that was the most striking feature emerging from Washington. It was as much a struggle between personalities as it was of ideas, with prominent figures on all sides of the debate intimately tied to well-rehearsed positions on an issue that requires flexibility. This din also had the result, as became increasingly apparent, that those who were guiding policies of immense importance were too busy with internal struggles to listen attentively enough to those who the policy was designed to benefit. This is not a blanket condemnation, however. While the supporters of the policy, its critics, its supporters-cum-critics and critics-cum-supporters were entangled with one another, mid-level employees at agencies close to the Bush administration such as MEPI and those
criticised by the Bush administration such as USAID were doing work that, I would soon discover, was well received by some organisations across the Arab world.

For instance, the director of a leading electoral monitoring organisation in Lebanon and a key player in the formation of the highly publicised Electoral Law Reform Bill in Lebanon had an overwhelmingly positive experience with MEPI. He would go so far as to claim that MEPI ‘kept it (his organisation) alive’ even when the organisation itself was on the brink of collapsing. MEPI, particularly its mid-level employees, had stood as the ‘greatest supporters of the electoral reform law in Lebanon’ even when the consequences of such a law, it is envisaged, would have been an empowerment of the numerically strong Shi’a community, an outcome seemingly at odds with US strategic interests in the region.6 The conflicts between the personalities and agencies involved in Washington’s democracy promotion policy had spilled over to the region. However, he argued that MEPI ‘protected the (organisation)’, allowed it to continue functioning in a very tenuous political environment, a level of support that drove him to claim that ‘I owe most of my successes in the region to MEPI’.7

This glowing endorsement was certainly not a standard reaction across the region. Indeed, it differed within Lebanon and the experiences of this organisation with others. However, it was revealing in terms of the charges often laid against the Bush administration and its agencies that either it is only interested in top-down change, enforcing democracy on the region or its policy is an insidious guise for the pursuit of ruthlessly calculated interests. Here was an agency, the vanguard of the Bush administration’s democracy promotion policy, that have actively intervened to keep alive the prospect of electoral reform that would have directly challenged its interests as this was the priority of the sponsored Arab civil society agency.

On the flip side of this was evidence of failures of the democracy promotion agencies and policy in general. This was the strongest and most consistent theme that emerged with conversations with people across the region. Big-ticket items such as the White House- and G8-sponsored BMENA process was described to me by one Egyptian analyst as ‘completely disastrous’.8 While it had moderate success ‘at the local level’, a prominent Jordanian journalist argued that it left all the big questions unanswered, notably the weakness of political institutions and the lack of respect for and integrity of these institutions.9

An example of this given to me by the member of a member of Egypt’s leftist Tagammu Party was on the question of ‘anti-systemic’ political organisations and their inclusion in the political process.10 Specifically, do you exclude them with a view to protecting the integrity of the institutions and therefore perpetuate a closed political system or do you incorporate them and put at risk the already highly fragile institutions?

Regime Resilience and Fostering Reform

These difficulties were compounded by two key deficiencies of the democracy promotion policy, one related to content and the other implementation. In terms of content, something that was echoed not only in Washington but also in Cairo,
Amman, Algiers, Beirut and elsewhere as well as in the vast bulk of the literature on this issue, was the focus on process over substance. That is, the influence of Eastern European experiences in the late 1980s and early 1990s left both the administration and many in the State Department with a fixation on elections as the key, if not sole symbol of democratic development. This is misguided in that the manipulation of electoral systems has become a staple part of what Steven Heydemann has labelled ‘upgrading authoritarianism’, a process of regime adaptation to changing global and local expectations and their ability to resist this.11

While I differ with Heydemann on some points, particularly on the resilience of patronage and clientelism as a defining feature of these regimes (I argue that these are still paramount), this understanding, along with Daniel Brumberg’s ‘liberalised autocracy’ and even Larry Diamond’s ‘hybrid regimes’ helps reveal the danger of placing too much emphasis on electoral processes.12 The resilience of authoritarian regimes and their ability to exploit elements of the democracy promotion policy was a consistent theme raised by democracy agents across the region. One key member of the Jordanian movement for political reform argued that ‘elections will happen anyway’.13 The real need is to help foster an environment that incubates a ‘pluralisation of politics’, a form of political socialisation through such mechanisms as helping to promote issues such as political transparency and the respect for institutional integrity as political and social norms.14 Easier said than done, admittedly, but this cuts to the core of where the policy should have been directing most of its attention.

The second element, one related to implementation, was a failure to wield what Tamara Wittes, a leading analyst of democracy promotion policy at the Brookings Institution, termed the necessary ‘Presidential capital’ in support of these policies.15 The democracy promotion agencies, notably MEPI and BMENA, did receive the support of key elements of the administration. However, this was never backed with consistent top-level visits to pressure elites across the region to engage with the idea of substantive change. More specifically, they required the personal support of the President in terms of visits to his colleagues in Cairo, Algiers, Riyadh and, indeed, Damascus as Mubarak, Bouteflika, Abdullah and Assad would only respond to such actions. This relates to issues of respect, being treated as equal partners in the process, as well as highlighting the supposed consultative nature of the policy. Instead, the lack of this furthered the perception that regimes and elites were being told to simply listen and respond.
Other views were expressed within Washington as to why the policy had met with limited success. One analyst at the neo-conservative think-tank the American Enterprise Institute voiced a more controversial view; that guided, consultative democracy promotion, a policy that is part of US strategic as well as ideological interests, cannot work. Instead, regional ‘governments (must be seen) as an adversary in the process for this to work’. This is not a surprising position to come from an advocate of regime change in Iraq and, potentially, Iran and Syria. However, while I am at odds with the policy conclusions drawn from this position, the comment did resonate for me when put against the overwhelming consensus from advocates for change across the Arab world as well as the emerging literature dealing with the active promotion of political reform and democracy in the Arab Middle East.

In particular, that regional political elites are focused, above all else, on their own survival. This has bred a remarkably resilient, flexible and manipulative form of authoritarianism that operates through informal channels of authority to keep oppositions divided and largely ineffective and its citizenry passive and apolitical. One can be highly sceptical of the idea of engagement with these elites, even through what Wittes terms as the need for ‘Presidential capital’, as any reform program is ultimately aimed at overturning their dominant position. Thus, there is some credence to the claim that these regimes are ‘adversaries’ in the reform process, and must be seen as such for any policy to connect with political realities across the Arab world.

It is a leap from this to advocating for forceful regime change, however. As is evident with Iraq, and the manipulation of the intense US pressure on Iran in terms of justifying the curbing of reformist trends, such confrontation and use of military force is highly counter-productive. Indeed, many activists across the Arab world surprised me when they down-played the idea of social revolution, with one advocate in Algiers stating that he thought social revolution in any Arab country ‘would probably be bad for democratic development’. This again raises the dilemma facing agents of democracy in the Arab world who face the desperate need to create political pluralism: they confront regimes that are adept like no other at maintaining their rule requiring them to seek external support yet this external support discredits them in the eyes of many they are seeking to rally and gives these regimes another avenue through which to curb their activities.

The United Nations: a reluctant participant?

For its part, the United Nations emerged in various contexts as somewhat of a ‘sleeper’ in issues around democracy promotion and political reform in the Arab world. Initially, the organisation became involved in this issue through the outcome of what Michael Doyle, chair of the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF) and prominent Columbia University academic, referred to as a ‘practical political logic’. The United Nations only enters a situation to help implement peace through the mechanism of power-sharing. It is the implicit undertone of power-sharing that pushes the United Nations towards democracy and supporting democratic transitions.
In this, the United Nations has been a latecomer to the area of democracy promotion, and one that is itself caught in a dilemma whereby it is an organisation based, above all else, on the principle of respect for state sovereignty but drawn by default into a practice that requires it to engage with, if not actively intervene in, the internal affairs of member states. This was an issue I put to both Roland Rich, the head of UNDEF, and Boutros Boutros-Ghali, former Secretary-General and in many ways the instigator of this process through his 1992 Agenda for Peace platform.

Rich acknowledged this dilemma. UNDEF, he acknowledged, was caught in a position whereby it had to ‘create a niche’ for itself without sailing too close to the wind in terms of interfering in member-states affairs. Rich was somewhat more adventurous than others in the organisation, arguing that UNDEF can afford to ‘increase the risk’ it faces, moving from ‘risk avoidance’ to ‘risk management’ in its dealings with member states and not simply providing assistance to governments on the implementation of elections or in the area of civil society strengthening. Instead, Rich highlighted areas such as curriculum development, media strengthening, enhancing the rule of law and training programs. However, more confrontational areas, particularly political party strengthening, were deemed as ‘not appropriate for UNDEF’.

The issue of strengthening civil society is important in light of some of the emerging trends vis-à-vis civil society and democratic development in the region echoed in both the interviews and some of the emerging literature. Civil society figures themselves acknowledged that there is a growing consensus, put most succinctly by Amaney Jamal, that the assumption of a strong civil society equalling a stronger likelihood of democratic development is not always true. Instead, there is a tendency, if not a discernable trend, for civil society organisations, particularly in states where there is a high degree of authoritarian control exercised, to simply reproduce prevailing conditions. In other words, civil society organisations help strengthen democracy in already democratic states, yet they have a tendency to perpetuate closed political structures in authoritarian states. This is largely due to their lack of autonomy and control in these systems. They are open to manipulation by the regimes, in effect enabling the regimes to defuse and control oppositional trends.

Jamal’s comments echo those of Antonio Gramsci, and highlight the changes within Arab political systems since Nazih Ayubi famously coined the notion of the ‘fierce state’. According to Ayubi, where common conceptualisations of state capabilities are often related to ‘weakness/strength’ or the state being ‘soft/hard’, the fierce state differs in that its interests are often contradictory to that of the society over which it rules. A strong state, for instance, is able to establish its authority through, using the Gramscian conceptualisation, a combination of coercion and legitimacy. Coercion serves as the ‘raw power’ of the state while hegemony is the process of state interests being assumed by civil society. Thus, the state need not rely on coercion as its interests are taken on by the citizenry through civil society as their own. However, this ‘capacity for social penetration’ had been lacking in most if not all Arab states to the 1990s, leaving them to rely on their coercive apparatus to enforce their interests. The state therefore displayed fierce tendencies because it relied on coercive tools and enforced them through vertical social relations, social
relations that have been hijacked from pre-existing forms and, as Hisham Sharabi contents, given a modern face.27

However, in recent years, Arab states have been far more successful in exerting control over civil society and political institutions as a means through which they can exert hegemony in the Gramscian sense (that is, an enhanced capacity for social penetration). It is the irony of the democracy promotion process, undertaken by the United States as well as increasingly by the United Nations, that the very avenues they seek to strengthen (first elections, then civil society and political institutions), each feed into the ability of these regimes to perpetuate themselves.

On this theme, Dr Boutros-Ghali was candid in his assessments of UN involvement in promoting or enabling democracies. He was at pains to highlight that the organisation should become involved only in the context of post-conflict reconstruction; it was not in the business of identifying and acting against states that had closed political systems. More important for the United Nations, and the ‘idea of democracy promotion’ more generally, argued Boutros-Ghali was the promotion of a ‘democracy of globalisation with (the participation of) non-democratic states’.28 This would enable the organisation to play to its strengths, particularly in terms of addressing trans-national issues such as migration and mass human movement, the environment, and trans-national security threats.

However, this position appears to sit at odds with the means by which the United Nations has become involved in support for democratic development. Boutros-Ghali’s Agenda for Peace, the blueprint for UN peace-building activity and the 1993 Vienna Conference on Human Rights injected into UN rhetoric the idea that political participation is a basic human right, thus a concern of the United Nations under the Charter.29 To shift its attention away from the political structures under which many in the Arab world exist highlights disregard on the part of the organisation of its obligations as laid out under the Charter. Despite this, the role of the United Nations as an active supporter of democracy promotion is something not yet examined in any depth.

The United Nations has a far sounder legal and ethical basis for activity in this area, and a potentially far more profound role to play in this regard. The big question is whether the organisation, being the sum of its parts that include the very states that this program seeks to reform, can utilise this in including them in the process while avoiding charges of interference in a state’s sovereign activities that have hamstrung the organisation in other key areas.
The Institutional Deficit

The promotion of political reform and ‘democracy’ is obviously a task fraught with difficulty. This task takes on more complexity in light of the creative means employed by autocratic regimes across the region. This was a view that gained a remarkable level of agreement across all policy-makers, analysts, advisors and practitioners with whom I spoke.

In the words of a leading Lebanese activist, governance in most (if not all) Arab states is a ‘horsetrading deal’ where everything, including political institutions, are up for negotiation.30 This stems from the situation where there are ‘no embedded mechanisms to protect the integrity of the political system’.31 Across the region, there is ‘rigidity at the level of political leadership’ stemming from both politico-cultural and socio-economic circumstances.32 Where political institutions need to serve as ‘incubators of leadership’, they instead serve to perpetuate existing elites (interestingly, one interviewee used the example of the Australian Labor Party and the process whereby several ALP leaders emerged through the trade union movement).

Political turnover ‘in real terms’, despite the presence of elections in many Arab states, occurs only through inheritance or the use of force. There is little to no popular input in the system, with the political institutions designed ‘to serve the interests of the elite’.33 It is this issue of institutional strengthening that sits at the core of the vast majority of concerns expressed by activists and an issue expressed in the emerging literature on democratisation and political change in the Arab world.

Returning to the comments of the Lebanese electoral rights activist outlined earlier regarding the importance of external support to the survival of his organisation, it is hard to argue with the appearance of objective, even altruistic support from a key US government agency in the strengthening of political institutions in Lebanon. However, scratching deeper, what is increasingly evident is that these actions actually feed in to the perpetuation of institutional weakness, one of the consistent features of US engagement in democracy promotion across the region. As was evident to both democracy promotion policy-makers and recipients of the policy’s largesse, the guiding principle underlying the strategy continues to be based on the experiences of Eastern Europe and Latin America from the 1970s to the 1990s. Here, the so-called ‘transitionalist’ school of thought on change is the
archetype. The transitionalist model focuses on the need for favourable economic conditions, the active support of outside powers, as well as previous experiences with democracy as the key foundations for democratic development.34 There has been a pronounced tendency in this approach to prescribe linear transitions from authoritarianism to democracy; elections as the key indicators of this transition; ‘organic’ staged or sequenced transitions that are resistant to mitigating structural factors; and the centrality of free market reforms to this process.35

The assumptions of this model have come under increasing question, notably as they have failed to account for the ‘dysfunctional equilibrium’ that many non-democratic states have been able to achieve, the emergence of what Larry Diamond labelled as ‘hybrid regimes’, where liberal and electoral democracies emerged alongside electoral authoritarian regimes, pseudo-democracies and politically closed regimes.36 Indeed, Arab states have mastered techniques of managing elements of change, particularly economic liberalisation and the establishment of political institutions, without transferring real power.

This has been achieved through a variety of means. For instance, Steven Cook from the Council on Foreign Relations who I consider the most articulate and conceptually grounded critic of Bush’s democracy promotion policy in the US, outlined to me his understanding of how militaries in particular Arab states, notably Egypt, Algeria, Syria and, to a lesser extent, Yemen are able to ‘rule, but not govern’.37 What Cook means by this is that in states such as Egypt and Algeria (and, to a lesser extent in recent years, Turkey), the military controls political power. However, while the institution is able to ‘rule’, ensuring the political status quo to enable its access to political, economic and social resources, it uses the ‘democratic facades and authoritarian institutions of … political systems (to) defuse and deflect challenges to the status quo’ while avoiding the task of day-to-day governance.38 Central to this is the establishment and manipulation of political institutions that serve to insulate the military from the machinations of day-to-day governmental functioning, while maintaining real control through what Toby Dodge has labelled as the ‘shadow state’.39

While those formulating democracy promotion policy have begun to recognise this change, there is a resonance of the transitionalist approach that limits their ability to fully understand the nuance of regime resilience in the Arab world. In particular, the work of Samuel Huntington on institutional development and regime stability (not his notorious Clash of Civilisations) has been highly influential among both those in Washington and many agents of reform across the region, many of whom received their tertiary education either in the United States or at the various US-sponsored universities such as the American University of Cairo and the American University of Beirut.40

Put simply, Huntington focused on the need for the establishment and proliferation of institutions to counter instability inherent in societies undergoing rapid political development and political change. However, turning back to the earlier discussion on the perpetuation of prevailing political and social conditions, Huntington’s earlier work, those that inform the transitionalist school are not so much concerned with the development of democratic institutions, but of institutions that ensure stability.41 According to Kiren Aziz Chaudhry, political institutions,
particularly in developing societies, are created by regimes; therefore, they are
designed above all else, to ensure the survival of dominant elites.\textsuperscript{42} This leads, in
many cases, to what Maria Olavarria and Ergun Özbudun have termed ‘perverse
institutionalisation’.\textsuperscript{43} This is what is known as ‘path dependency’ among political
scientists, the shaping of future developments by the current context.\textsuperscript{44}

Efforts to finance existing civil society organisations may simply facilitate the reproduction of
existing power dynamics, allowing elites to maintain their authority largely fed into this, even when it moved beyond its initial focus on transitionalist
priorities such as electoral processes. Efforts to strengthen existing political institutions, or the financing of existing civil society organisations, appear to be
simply facilitating the reproduction of existing power dynamics, allowing elites to maintain their authority, keeping the opposition divided and disempowered, as well as deflecting international attention from the continuing lack of political freedoms across the region.

**Damned if you do ...**

This paints an admittedly very bleak picture of the prospects for political reform and
democratic development across the Arab world. This was an inescapable conclusion,
and one that was informed primarily by those people experiencing it and many who,
despite this, continue to act as agents for change. There were encouraging signs of
greater interaction between reformists and policy-makers in Washington. However,
most policy discussions continue to come back to the familiar set of dilemmas.

First, the United States could revert back to its almost unconditional support
for non-democratic allies across the region. However, this would lead to a continuing
festering of resentment towards the United States, something that is ultimately an
untenable situation for both the citizenry of Arab states as well as US calculations of
national interest. Second, the United States could seek to amplify its democracy
promotion policy. However, in this regard it is seen as a ‘kiss of death’ for many
agents of change whose backing from the United States would lead to governmental
repression.\textsuperscript{45} Finally, the United States may seek to reform its policy, one that I see as
least-worst option.

More specifically, the question needs to be asked first of what can possibly be
achieved in this environment. Alone, very little can be done by an external power to
promote political reform in the Arab world. For fear of wearing out a cliché, change
must come from within. However, the policy focus needs to pay more attention to
removing obstacles rather than seeking to manufacture reform. In terms of removing
obstacles, a first step may be to focus on policies that help invest within both
institutions and potentially catalytic civil society organisations a measure of value
that needs to be respected. It is not the number of institutions and organisations, it is the weight they carry.

One very damaging element has been the level of rhetorical importance invested in this issue by the current US administration. It has raised expectations on it far beyond what it can achieve realistically. In this regard, a main problem with the White House’s policy has been the White House itself. Programs focused on helping to enhance a political environment conducive to the development of political pluralism require decades of behind the scenes work coupled with the utilisation of Presidential capital at key moments. Efforts at helping to create normative shifts in political attitudes need to be sponsored, ones that are ‘locally-owned and locally-driven’.46

After twenty-three flights, twelve cities and fifty-eight interviews in two months, it is difficult to capture a single coherent theme to emerge from this field research. What is apparent upon immediate reflection is that the Bush administration has overseen a clumsy, heavy-handed, even bungling policy, driven by a confused ideology that blinkered key decision-makers to the nuance on the ground. To be sure, there was evidence of the US imposing a more strictly national interest logic in its interaction with Arab states, one need only look at its support for the litany on non-democratic regimes across the region. There is also evidence of well-targeted programs that met the needs of important agents of political reform across the Arab world.

There has been a marked change in US engagement with the Arab world under the current administration. This change is marked by uncertainty, an ad hoc strategy that has only been selectively applied. For the agents of political reform across the Arab Middle East and North Africa, this inconsistency and ambiguity holds potentially dire consequences. Consistency in terms of external support for political reform, even if this means cutting back on some existing programs, is vital for these agents to take ownership of reform programs in their own states, to make them locally-owned and locally-driven. It certainly will not make the task of enhancing political reform in the Arab world easy, but it may be a first step in the establishment of a viable political alternative in these tightly controlled systems.
Endnotes

1. Anonymous interview with author (Washington DC), 14/01/08.
2. ibid.
3. Anonymous interview with author (Washington DC), 15/01/08.
4. Anonymous interview with author (Washington DC), 14/01/08.
5. Anonymous interview with author (Washington DC), 15/01/08.
6. Anonymous interview with author (Beirut), 27/01/08 (parenthesis added).
7. ibid. (parenthesis added).
8. Anonymous interview with author (Cairo), 6/02/08.
9. Anonymous interview with author (Amman), 31/01/08.
10. Anonymous interview with author (Cairo), 5/02/08.
13. Anonymous interview with author (Amman), 30/01/08.
14. Anonymous interview with author (Beirut), 26/01/08.
15. Interview with author (Washington DC), 15/01/08.
16. Interview with author (Washington DC), 15/01/08.
17. Anonymous interview with author (Algiers), 19/02/08.
18. Interview with author (New York), 18/01/08.
19. ibid.
20. ibid.
21. ibid.
28. Interview with author (Paris), 15/02/08.
29. ibid.
30. Anonymous interview with author (Beirut), 26/01/08.
31. ibid.
32. ibid.
33. Anonymous interview with author (Cairo), 6/02/08.
34. O’Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead’s 1986 work is central to this approach. See Guillermo O’Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter and Laurence Whitehead (eds.), *Transitions*


37. Interview with author (New York), 17/01/08; Steven Cook, Ruling But Not Governing The Military and Political Development in Egypt, Algeria, and Turkey (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).


45. Interview with author (Washington DC), 15/01/08.

46. ibid.