

Arab Countries in Transition

Ed. Note – Given the complexity of the political landscape, attempts to address this region as a whole risk oversimplification to the point of inaccuracy. This chapter intends to offer general guidance on a rapidly changing area of the world.

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After decades of repression, the Arab Spring protests signaled a desire for dignity, democracy, economic opportunity, freedom, social justice, and hope. In some countries, these protests appear to be backfiring, entrenching a new generation of autocrats with different ideologies, but the same repressive tactics. The U.S. has limited power to determine the outcomes of these changes, and they are not ours to dictate.

But where the U.S can put a thumb on the scales, we



If you read only one thing

- Remember: America can't and shouldn't try to explicitly direct change in the Middle East; that would backfire.
- There's no one solution. Each transitioning Arab country is different and will have different challenges.
- Support democracy, even when it's tough. Real change might be slow, but building relationships with the people, rather than dictators, will be better for us in the long run.
- Support civil society. U.S. support for governance, watchdog groups, small businesses, and activists who promote individual freedoms will improve our reputation and promote stability.
- Reduce U.S. dependence on oil. Our oil money helps prop up dictatorships, permitting them to buy off domestic opposition and hold on to power. Less oil spending here means more stability and democracy there.

should support democracy after many years of backing authoritarian governments. This will be hard in each case: Islamist parties that do not always agree with America will continue to be elected. But moving away from dictatorship, towards inclusive, representative government will ensure more stability, opportunity, and regional security in the long run.

So what should we do?

America should strongly support those who seek democratic reform and have renounced violence, while acknowledging that reform will ultimately help to secure U.S. strategic interests in the long term. Robust U.S. national security consists of more than just tanks and planes; it also includes the spread of universal values like freedom and human rights and the provision of technical assistance to support the development of vibrant, indigenous, and progressive societies. Significant research shows that democracies are more stable and less likely to produce violent or extremist elements than autocracies, even though the progress towards real, lasting change is slow and often includes steps backward as well as forward.

Many Arab countries share similar problems, even if the solutions are different. Money from oil-rich states and Western support permitted many Arab dictators to maintain power much longer than might otherwise have been possible, often through subsidizing common goods, maintaining large security and intelligence forces, and suppressing any outlets that might lead to alternative political leadership. With opposition stifled for



Democracy means that some countries will elect leaders we don't like. Americans believe in democracy, even if it takes a while to mature.



We didn't always stand up for our own values in the past, when we supported dictators. We can't expect people to forget that.

so long, this legacy has made moves towards a new political class difficult. In the name of stability, the U.S. often supported these dictators, even as bad economic policies and population growth created a bulge of young, unemployed people increasingly disillusioned and frustrated with the status quo.

Communicating the Challenges

Creating jobs and opportunities is vital for the future of the region. Arab countries have very young and educated populations that are frustrated by limited economic opportunities. The region's youth are saddled with a 25% unemployment rate. Traditionally, economic growth in the region has not stimulated job creation; in fact, the most educated have some of the highest unemployment rates. Growth has been generated by oil revenues concentrated in the hands of a few elites and by politically-connected crony capitalists. Lasting stability requires the development of economic opportunities for young people, not just the well-connected. It is important to note that a lack of economic opportunity among young people was one of the key drivers and underpinnings of the Arab Spring. Enhancing economic opportunity for young people will also prevent them from feeling disenfranchised and decrease their chance of being recruited by extremist elements.

Islamist groups will continue to be voted into power. Islamist parties are currently generally better-organized than secular, liberal parties. They have dominated elections since the Arab Spring began, and will continue to be a political force across the Arab world. Many Arabs support Islamists

not for strictly ideological reasons, but because they have a reputation for getting things done, have long provided social services that autocratic governments neglected, and are seen as less corrupt. But if these parties fail to deliver on their promises, they are likely to meet future opposition. For example, the Islamist Ennahda party in Tunisia won its first elections, only to agree to resign one year later under intense public pressure for a failure to deliver on promised reforms. And as time goes on, other parties and civic institutions have the potential to strengthen platforms for inclusive, more representative governments.

Democracies can—and should – demand that all parties renounce violence, whenever applicable. But we must stand by progress towards representative democracy, regardless of electoral outcomes; going back to supporting dictatorships, military governments, and autocrats will create more volatility down the line.

The spread of democracy will help win the war against al Qaeda and its affiliates. A 2011 West Point study found that political dictatorship is the main factor correlated with terrorism. Democratic societies breed less anger because the people have outlets for civic and political engagement, established systems for rule of law and impartial justice, and economic opportunity free from state appropriation and corruption. Democracies also create opportunities for people to determine their own future. Societies without these outlets, where there is no hope for change, are where extremist leaders advocating for change through violence find the most fertile ground for recruiting. Supporting transitions to full democracies will reduce our enemies' recruitment pools.

A changing region gives Israel legitimate concerns and highlights the need for a lasting Israel-Palestinian peace agreement. Israel



Common Error

Islamist parties are not all extreme. Espousing strong support for the dominant faith is common in democracies, as with the many Christian Democratic parties in Europe. Over time, political Islam tends to reduce extremism, since any political party needs to appeal to a wide swath of voters and can be destroyed if fringe elements hijack its agenda.



Dictatorships produce more terrorists than democracies. Even if real change is slow, al Qaeda becomes weaker when people can vote.

established relations with some of the region's dictators in an effort to seek stability. In part because of that history, dynamics in today's societies, and ongoing frustration with Israeli positions in the Arab-Israeli peace process, many parts of Arab society are deeply critical of Israel. With many of their former allies now ousted from power, the changing regional environment may be volatile for Israel in the short-term. We should help Israel adapt to this new reality and maintain its security by ensuring that all parties honor their peace agreements and commitments and by supporting efforts to broker a lasting resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Where possible, we should also seek to create opportunities for deeper connections between civil society in Israel and in neighboring Arab countries. Trying to turn back the clock by supporting the autocracies that remain is unrealistic, and does not help Israel secure itself for the long-term.

There is no simple solution or approach to the challenges facing post-revolution Arab countries. Some say the Obama administration was too slow in responding to events in the region; others declare that he “lost the Middle East” to Islamists. These are simplistic talking points that both overestimate any President's ability to direct events in the region and underestimate the work that can be done by the United States to support democratic change.

Moving forward, we should recognize that political transitions in each country have produced unique challenges and should be addressed accordingly. For example, in Tunisia and Egypt, the most pressing concerns are securing post-revolution political freedoms and expanding economic opportunities. Egypt also faces major challenges in reforming civil-military relations, security sector reform, and overhauling government subsidies. Other countries, such as Libya, have an urgent

need for institution building, security training, and structural reforms to transition the anti-Qaddafi fighting forces either into the state or back to civilian life. Yemen, on the other hand, requires national infrastructure and economic development – seemingly more basic, but just as important for future security.

Reduce U.S. dependence on oil. U.S. energy needs play a major role in dictating our relationships with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and other non-democratic states in the region. And because oil is a globally-priced commodity, we enrich non-democratic oil regimes no matter who we buy from. Reducing U.S. demand for oil gives us a freer hand to support the people of the region and to reduce support for the autocratic regimes that create conditions for violent extremism.