

The International Spectator 4/2004

Promoting Democracy in the Arab World: The Challenge of Joint Action

Tamara Cofman Wittes*

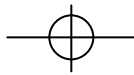
The vituperative disputes that plagued transatlantic relations during 2003 centred around policy toward the Middle East, specifically Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Given this fresh history, it is perhaps surprising how much energy the Bush administration invested in 2004 toward joint US-European action to promote democratisation in the Middle East. Europe and the United States have now come to some agreement on key goals regarding the political, economic, and social development of the Middle East, and on the stakes for the West in the Middle East's developmental success. The question remains: how meaningful is this apparent consensus, and what does it portend for the ability of Western states to influence developments in this important neighbouring region?

This article will assess the transatlantic agreement on democracy promotion in the Middle East that was embodied in the three transatlantic summits of June 2004,¹ and mainly in the G-8's 'Partnership for Progress and

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¹ The Sea Island G-8 summit, the Ireland US-EU summit, and the Istanbul NATO summit. For the US-EU Declaration Supporting Peace, Progress, and Reform in the Broader Middle

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a Common Future with the Region of the Broader Middle East and North Africa' and its 'Plan of Support for Reform' (hereafter jointly referred to as the 'BMENA Initiative').² Second, it will critically evaluate the approach to democratic reform evident on both sides of the Atlantic and the challenges this approach presents for effective action to advance democracy in the Arab world. Finally, the article will lay out two key programmatic challenges and one diplomatic challenge that remain to be tackled before effective mechanisms can be formulated to implement shared US and European objectives regarding Arab reform.³

The BMENA Initiative

The documents produced at the G-8 summit in Sea Island, Georgia suggest that, at long last, Europe and the United States have arrived at a common understanding of the problem that confronts them in the region, and of the goals of the intended intervention on the issue of Arab reform.

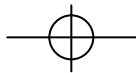
The BMENA Initiative cements a consensus among Western states that continued political stagnation in the countries of the Middle East threatens the peace and stability of that region, as well as the security of Western states. There is a shared understanding today that overcoming Arab countries' developmental stagnation is not simply a question of mitigating labour migration or generously promoting socio-economic development, but a question of avoiding a real and increasing risk of radicalisation and state failure that can produce effects directly threatening to the rest of the world.

The G-8 documents clearly articulate the goal of Arab reform as democracy, a step forward from the looser formulations regarding good governance or human rights that prevailed before. Stating the goal as democracy implies a set of expectations regarding political rights and political participation that Western states can operationalise and refer to in their relations with Arab states. If the region's efforts at reform are going to meet Western needs, as set down in the G-8 statement, then being specific about what Western interests require of the reform process is important both for honest dialogue with

East and in the Mediterranean, see <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/06/200406_26-1.html>; for the NATO declaration of the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, see <<http://www.nato.int/docu/comm/2004/06-istanbul/docu-cooperation.htm>>.

² These two G-8 documents are available through the White House website at <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/g8/index.html>>.

³ The BMENA Initiative and other unilateral and multilateral efforts by the transatlantic states encompass the region stretching from Morocco to Pakistan. This article, however, will concentrate on the core challenge of promoting democratic reform in the Arab states.



regional partners, and ultimately for the effectiveness of Western intervention. How the Western states follow up on this declared goal of democracy is, of course, important and much less evident at this stage.

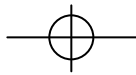
The BMENA statement of principles (the 'Partnership for Progress' document) clearly articulates that democratic values are universal. Moreover, the G-8 states agree that the uniqueness of local circumstances "must not be exploited to prevent reform", a clear reference to states, like Saudi Arabia, that claim that their faith and conservative identity make progressive social and political reform unpalatable to their societies. So the G-8 has set a useful limit on Arab states' claims of particularity, which had been used to create an obstacle to effective Western democracy promotion in the past.

The BMENA documents ensure that the dialogue on democratic reform between the West and the Middle East will include not only governments, but also business and civil society groups. The documents state that government, business leaders and civil society groups from the Arab world are all 'full partners' in the work of democratic reform. Defining partnership in this way is new and an important step forward in Western democracy promotion projects. Local ownership doesn't mean that governments get a monopoly on the articulation of reform goals for their citizens. Taking up the challenge, the most impressive part of the preparatory 'Forum for the Future' meetings in New York in September 2004 were the presentations by the civil society and business leaders to the group of G-8 ministers.⁴ This question of civil society's role is central to what we do now, and will be a focus in the text below.

The G-8 summit was also important in that it finally moved the United States and Europe beyond their long-running and sterile debate as to the relative urgency of attending to Arab reform or to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While the BMENA Initiative notes that resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is "an important element of progress in the region", it argues that "regional conflicts must not be an obstacle for reforms". At this point both Europe and the United States recognise the necessity of action as well as the limited scope for action on these issues.

But while the BMENA Initiative achieved transatlantic unity behind the goals of regional reform, it did not provide much in the way of credible mechanisms to realise that commitment. Beyond its Forum for the Future and Democracy Assistance Dialogue, the Plan of Support for Reform commits G-8 states to some small-scale economic and social development programs,

⁴ The BMENA Initiative's flagship program is a regular meeting of G-8 and Middle Eastern ministers called the 'Forum for the Future'. Middle Eastern business and civil society representatives are meant to have simultaneous parallel meetings alongside the Forum sessions.



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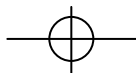
many of which are only tenuously related to democracy promotion. It is not lost on the regional actors, both governmental and non-governmental, that little new money for even these small, uncontroversial programs has been allocated. In a Middle Eastern environment where Western (not just US) intentions are suspect, and where Western deeds have fallen far short of declarations in Iraq and on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the failure of the G-8 states to commit to robust implementation of their Sea Island commitments may hamper their attempts to play a positive role in the ongoing process of political change in the Arab world.

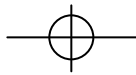
The advocates of the BMENA Initiative see the Forum for the Future as the central institution for advancing the democratic agenda and holding Arab governments accountable to both internal and external demands. But a significant flaw in the Forum's design, one that reflects a fundamental unresolved question in Western attempts to address this issue of Arab reform, will make it very hard for the Forum to play its intended role. The Forum is meant to include a regular meeting of ministers (and, in parallel, business and civil society groups) to discuss reform issues and monitor progress on democracy. The Forum is loosely modelled on the APEC Forum and the Helsinki process, two cases in which a group of sovereign states jointly created a mechanism for regular dialogue on issues including human rights and political freedoms. But this Forum does not resemble the Helsinki process or APEC in one key respect: the Helsinki process grew from an agreement in which Western and Eastern bloc states jointly committed to respect each other's sovereignty and not to overturn each other's governments by force. In exchange, they agreed to a dialogue on human rights and increased freedom for civic groups at home.

The G-8 Forum is rooted in no such bargain. It was created with Middle Eastern states treated as 'targets' of the reform dialogue. The G-8 states do not link joining the Forum with enjoying other benefits of the G-8 reform package (and certainly not with a mutual guarantee of sovereignty). This failure means that G-8 states have already given away much of the initiative's potential to persuade Arab autocrats to loosen their domestic controls. And with no human rights criteria for participating in the G-8's new literacy, job training and business promotion programs, Arab states are offered the help of the West to implement economic reforms they largely want, while ignoring Western rhetorical pressure for the political reforms they do not want.

Linking political and economic reform through conditionality

Why does the G-8 document fall short on this key question of linking economic to political reform and providing effective economic incentives





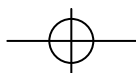
for Arab regimes to undertake gradual political change? Experiences including the Barcelona process and the Gore-Mubarak Partnership⁵ have demonstrated to Western countries the futility of promoting economic liberalisation as a precursor for expanded political freedoms.

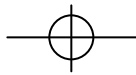
The struggles of Egypt and other Arab states to implement structural economic reforms in the 1990s revealed the limitations of an economically-focused reform policy. The fact that most economies in the Arab world are state-dominated means that economic reform is itself a very political act and that, without determined political reform, it is difficult to undertake the necessary structural reforms of Arab economies. In addition, the experience of other developing countries undertaking structural reform show that economic reform is as likely to produce economic dislocation and exaggerated income disparity (and thus social tensions) in the short term as it is to produce economic growth and new jobs in the longer term. Without political reform, economic reform can increase, instead of decrease, citizens' frustration and social instability and lead to undesirable political outcomes. Moreover, in a post-9/11 world, economic development alone in the Arab world is not sufficient to meet Western interests in the region's reform process – basic liberty and greater public participation in governance are important to reduce the legitimacy of violence and the radical politics that supports it.⁶ Yet this understanding is not clearly integrated into the G-8 or other transatlantic plans to support regional reform.

There are different reasons in Europe and in the United States for why this failure to change policy occurred. When the European Union launched the Barcelona process in 1995, the European states' main concern was economic: labour migration from the southern Mediterranean to the north was the core problem that required addressing. Because this was the motivating factor, economic development for its own sake was a shared goal of the Mediterranean states and their European partners. This naturally made the Barcelona process move in practice much more quickly on economic development and trade relations than on its human rights agenda. In a post-9/11, post-Madrid world, that shared interest in economic development remains, but the European interest in the region's development should be broader. European governments at this point have reason to view economic development in the southern Mediterranean as a means to something larger, not so much as an

⁵ Formally the US-Egypt Partnership for Economic Growth and Development, begun in 1998.

⁶ See the reasoning in, for example, the speech by Joschka Fischer, German Minister for Foreign Affairs, at the 40th Munich Conference on Security Policy, Munich, 7 February 2004 <http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/www/en/ausgabe_archiv?archiv_id=5338>.





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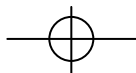
end in itself. Whatever the extent of that realisation (and clearly some European capitals do hold this view), it is not yet apparent in the programmatic commitments of European governments.

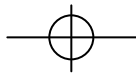
There remains, evidently, a gap between the understanding of many European analysts, including those who have worked on the Barcelona process, and the practice of European governments, regarding the relationship between economic and political reform. Some European governments feel deeply invested in the trade and assistance relationships they have built with Arab governments in the Euro-Mediterranean process, and they remain disinclined to embrace a policy that more tightly conditions economic relations on political reform.

On the US side, despite a willingness to consider greater political conditionality in economic relations (this willingness is evidenced, for example, in the creation of the Millennium Challenge Corporation), there is as yet no clear answer to the question of how to make conditionality effective in US-Arab relations, or how to prevent conditionality on political reform from exacting costs in terms of Arab cooperation with strategic American goals in the region, especially in the peace process and the war on terrorism. Since the US government has no comfortable answers to these questions, it has been reluctant to upset the apple cart by restructuring its aid and trade relations with Arab states to fully incorporate political reform as a goal.

As a result of the disjuncture on both sides of the Atlantic between the lessons of experience and the imperatives of daily policy formulation and implementation, and with the added incentive of least-common-denominator multilateralism, the G-8 reform plans also emphasise economic development, particularly private sector development, and have very little content regarding political reform. Washington, at least, comforts itself with the belief that, in the long run, private sector growth and middle class growth tend to create pressures for greater transparency and citizen participation in governance. European capitals may also be willing to satisfy themselves with this theorised linkage between political and economic reform. Unless that complacency is challenged, Western governments will likely face another round of disappointment in stalled or even reversed reform, just as occurred in Egypt in the 1990s. More dangerous, such complacency in not enforcing the clear relationship between political and economic reform, and the resulting failure of economic liberalisation to succeed in changing Arab citizens' lives will not only undermine the credibility of Western commitments to democratic reform, but may also discredit among Arabs the very notion of reform as an effective answer to the contemporary problems of Arab societies.

Some Western observers and even some policymakers reject the idea of



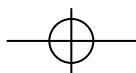


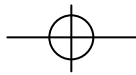
conditionality outright, believing it to be inconsistent with the principle of 'partnership'. That may be true, if by partnership is meant a partnership of Western governments with Arab governments. But if one takes as a starting point the desire of Western states to address Arab citizens who want to improve their lives, and who as individuals choose to stay at home or to emigrate, to remain productive citizens or to join a violent radical movement, then partnership must go beyond government-to-government relations. In this environment, conditioning Western relations with Arab governments on their behaviour toward their own citizens seems wholly appropriate.

The larger Arab states, especially, have embraced a strategy of controlled liberalisation in response to internal and external pressures, seeking to reform in ways that improve government and economic performance without changing the distribution of political power. While a few forward-leaning regimes have placed some power in the hands of their peoples through constitutional and electoral reforms, many others are trying to create just enough sense of forward motion to alleviate the building public pressure for change at the top. As discussed above, the United States and some European states have already concluded that the path of controlled liberalisation in the Arab world is not consistent with their needs and goals for the reform process there, and that meaningful economic reform and meaningful political reform must go hand-in-hand to be successful. In principle, therefore, and according to the terms of the BMENA Initiative, the United States and its Western partners have a basic strategic disagreement with most Arab governments on their reform strategies, with perhaps a handful of exceptions. Western governments and institutions must keep this hard-won insight in mind as they proceed to plan new interventions on this issue.⁷

As it stands today, the transatlantic community's main initiative to promote Arab reform still reflects the pre-11 September bias among Western governments to let Arab governments set the agenda for reform. This fundamental problem was clearly on display at the preparatory meetings for the Forum for the Future in September 2004. The United States government invested a great deal of effort and political capital to achieve Arab governmental participation in the preparatory meeting. Although the participation

⁷ This is not meant to suggest that Western governments are, or should set themselves, in opposition to Arab regimes and foment popular revolutions in Arab countries, even were this a feasible strategy. However, if Western governments recall that their main concern is to moderate the attitudes and behaviours of individual Arab citizens rather than of Arab governments, and that Arab citizens are thus meant to be the primary targets and beneficiaries of the reform process, this has necessary implications for Western policies and relations with Arab governments.





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of Arab governments in the ministerial meeting was almost universal, the substantive component of that meeting was extremely thin. This likely reinforced among Arab regimes the conviction that their symbolic accession to the G-8 reform agenda was of greater value to Western states than their actual progress on domestic political freedom.

The role of civil society

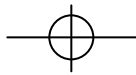
In practice, the continued ambivalence in the United States and Europe over political conditionality for economic assistance to Arab governments, and the resulting gap between the G-8's enunciated reform principles and its plan of support for reform, has essentially cut new slack for the regimes of the Middle East and thrown the burden for change onto civil society actors. A core challenge for democracy advocates and policy analysts in the West, then, is to determine how to make the limited democracy assistance available maximally effective in helping Arab civil society promote reform.

Civil society in the region may yet be small and weak, but its voice has grown significantly in strength over the past two years.⁸ Indeed, the most promising aspect of the G-8 plan of support for reform is its integration of Arab civil society and business activists into the Arab-Western dialogue about reform which largely excluded them in the past.⁹

Because the burden for initiative within the region is now on civil society, Western governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) concerned with implementing effective democracy assistance programs must determine how to address two centrally important political forces: liberals and Islamists.

⁸ Civil society conferences have produced courageous and detailed agendas for reform including, inter alia, the "Alexandria Declaration" of March 2004 <<http://www.arabreformforum.org/English/Document.htm>>, the Final Report from the Arab Civil Forum in Beirut, 19-22 March 2004 <http://www.euromedrights.net/english/Download/Report_arab_cf_beirut.doc>, and the blueprint for economic reform issued by the Arab Business Council of the World Economic Forum in January 2004 <http://www.weforum.org/pdf/ABC/ABC_R1.pdf>.

⁹ At the preparatory meetings for the Sept. 2004 Forum for the Future, the business and civil society meetings were apparently the most substantive and inspiring portion of the proceedings, such that even US Secretary of State Colin Powell, a relative sceptic regarding US democracy promotion in the Middle East, came away impressed with the need to support these reform activists. That this outcome reflects civil society's growing strength and organisation rather than any Western engineering is evident from the fact that the US government itself devoted little planning to these "side" meetings, as compared to the ministerial meeting.



Arab liberals

The first challenge for Western democracy assistance is how to engage with, nurture, and strengthen Arab liberals so that they can present a credible alternative to authoritarian regimes and to radical Islamists – and how to provide this support without making Arab liberals vulnerable to the charge of acting as Western puppets.

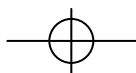
It is undoubtedly true, as an empirical matter, that Arab liberals are a minority among politically active Arabs, and that they appear to be out of the mainstream of Arab public opinion. But does this mean that liberals are not likely to be effective voices on behalf of democratic change in their societies? Some have been arguing that Arab liberals are an ageing, shrinking, and marginal group, out of touch with the mainstream of Arab opinion.¹⁰

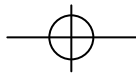
Historically speaking, this would not be surprising: liberals have always been, in every society, a small, elite group isolated from the “grassroots”. This was true in revolutionary America, in enlightenment Europe, and in Eastern Europe before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Liberal activists do not generally enjoy wide popularity because liberalism is not a populist ideology. The importance of liberal activists lies less in their numerical support than in their ability to articulate and fight for a definition of justice that represents the deepest aspirations of a wide variety of citizens. But it is not accurate, as some argue, that liberals in the Arab world are ageing and decreasing in number.¹⁰ It may be that ‘liberal intellectuals’ in the tradition of those who flourished in the early decades of the twentieth century are ageing and decreasing in number. But there is a younger generation of liberals who are not intellectuals: they are businessmen, lawyers and doctors, and they are fairly pragmatic in their strategies for promoting liberal politics and liberal ideas. These Arab liberals have not universally chosen an oppositional stance in their political strategies within their own countries; they are not all dissidents, operating underground. Many have chosen for the time being to work through persuasion of their ruling regimes, to work within ruling parties and regime-dominated institutions to push their ideas as far as they can.

It is this bifurcation within the Arab liberal elite that makes supporting Arab liberals such a difficult challenge for Western democracy advocates. How can the West support those liberals who are working for change within their existing systems, but in a way that doesn’t end up legitimising the system itself and facilitating the regimes’ attempts to co-opt and neutralise their

⁹ J. Alterman, “The False Promise of Arab Liberals”, Policy Review no. 125 (June/July 2004).

¹⁰ T. Cofman Wittes “The Promise of Arab Liberalism”, *Ibid.*





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liberal critics? And how can Western supporters ensure that their regional partners remain committed to liberal politics, without insisting that these liberal activists stand wholly in opposition to the regimes that rule them? US and European funders and aid agencies must support liberals on both sides of this divide: those who are trying to achieve as much as they can by persuasion, and those who have passed the limits of allowable persuasion and are suffering the consequences of challenging their ruling regimes.

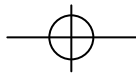
Two initial steps will help outsiders who wish to provide assistance strike this difficult balance. First, Western donors should be very clear both among themselves and with their regional interlocutors (government and NGO) about the principles and standards that guide their assistance – and here the explicit goal of democratic reform, as opposed to merely good governance, should be a relevant guide for their actions. Second, Western supporters should stay in close contact with the liberal activists in the countries where they are working to ensure that outside assistance (and diplomatic pressure) reinforces the locals' chosen strategies.

Over the past decade, the Western approach to democracy assistance has been based on the assumption that Arab civil society was inadequate to the task of pressing for change. Western donors looked for chinks in the armour of the authoritarian state and tried to employ technical assistance as a wedge to create constituencies for reform. Today, Western donors can work with extant developments on the ground. If a liberal minister is trying to introduce tax reforms, what can Western states do to help? If a journalists' union is trying to expand its role into advocacy on behalf of real press freedom, how can Western democracy assistance support them? Here the Democracy Assistance Dialogue that is part of the G-8 and that is co-chaired by Italy, Turkey and Yemen might prove a very useful coordinating institution between Western donor agencies and democracy assistance NGOs on the one hand, and regional democracy activists on the other hand.

Islamist movements

In addition to Arab liberals, there is another, overlapping, constituency that Western states must address seriously in order to improve political freedom in this part of the world. Thus far, Western governments have failed utterly to integrate Islamist political movements into their vision for the region's political future and into their strategies for promoting political reform.

Islamist movements still command the majority of what exists today as popular oppositional sentiment in the Arab world. European and American governments share the concern that Islamist movements represent potential (perhaps even likely) spoilers in the democratisation picture in many Arab



states. It may prove that their current apparent support is in fact an artefact of stunted political dialogue and will not survive long in a freer public square.¹² But the 'lesson of Algeria', the Western fear that too-quick political openings might lead to take-overs of Arab governments by radical Islamists, has created a near-allergy among Western governments to dealing with nearly all Islamist parties. Western governments have become so afraid of empowering the 'wrong' Islamist movements that they don't try to empower any at all.¹³ As Richard Youngs has noted, the current Western attitude leaves Islamist political movements as the "untouchables of the democracy assistance world".¹⁴

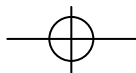
Liberals and Islamists are not necessarily mutually exclusive or mutually antagonistic groups, but the prevailing political framework in most of the Arab world today makes them behave that way. When the regimes restrict speech and association everywhere but in religious institutions, Islamists enjoy an advantage, and have no incentive to argue for liberal political rights. When Islamists enjoy this protected position as the only viable opposition, disadvantaged liberals likewise have no incentive to show tolerance for religious values or expression in politics, indeed their resentment at the imbalance is sometimes expressed as anti-religious bigotry. Liberals and Islamists will probably remain unable to unite behind a pro-democracy agenda as long as the regimes that control them continue this cynical manipulation of their domestic political space.

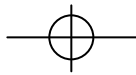
Western governments must press regimes to open up the public square to real competition of political ideas in order to level this playing field and enable the emergence, where they exist, of liberal Islamist politicians who can compete, and perhaps cooperate with Islamists on an equal basis. Western governments must ensure that the Islamists with whom they engage embrace democracy as an end and not a means – and that may mean that it is best, at least at first, to engage them through and within a broader

¹² By design, the regimes' top-down liberalisation does not relax state control sufficiently to enable the formation of any organised political alternative to the state itself or the Islamist opposition movements. The Islamists have the mosque as a place to organise, while other arenas of social organisation are still tightly restricted. In this way, the regimes maintain control – but also maintain the Islamist opposition as the only alternative to their rule. At the same time, the Islamists' dominance of the opposition is the excuse many regimes offer Washington as to why truly free politics is too dangerous and political reform can go only so far and no farther.

¹³ Western embassies, however, do maintain informal dialogues with some among them.

¹⁴ R. Youngs, *Europe's Uncertain Pursuit of Middle East Reform*, Carnegie Papers no. 45 (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2004).





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pro-democracy civil society coalition. But their intentions cannot be tested until there is a competitive political process in which they have some incentive to participate. In such circumstances, it would be self-defeating for Western agencies to blacklist all political actors who say that their public policy platform is religiously inspired.

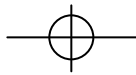
The US and Europe have a powerful tool to aid their governments and civil society actors in exploring the possibilities for Islamist participation in building more democratic societies in the Arab world: their own Muslim diasporas. With the increased strength and political mobilisation of these communities, the US and European governments should encourage moderate voices within them to make themselves heard not only in their adopted homes but in their homelands as well, spreading a message of tolerance and also of Muslims thriving in situations of diversity and freedom in the West. Of course, for this message to be conveyed it must be heartfelt, and that means that the utmost must be done to integrate Muslim immigrants into Western societies and to facilitate their success as equal citizens.

The United States has an additional resource it can draw on in the coming months and years in re-evaluating its attitude toward Islamist movements in the Arab world: its growing experience in Iraq of negotiating and sharing governance responsibilities with active, grassroots Islamist parties like the Dawa and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. While Sunni-Shia differences are important in political religion, it is nonetheless true that Iraq presents an example of an Arab political space in which multiple, legitimate, respected religious parties compete (mainly) peacefully for audience and adherents. If successful elections can be conducted in January 2005, as planned, the Iraqi example will be even more relevant and inspiring for the United States and for the region.

The unavoidable importance of diplomacy

The above points on liberals and Islamists are meant to help Western actors strategically employ their democracy assistance and democracy-building programs in ways that would facilitate the role of Arab civil society in winning its own political freedom. But there is another side to this coin that is also critical.

A final crucial challenge for Western states is how to forge effective joint diplomatic action toward Arab regimes to press for greater political rights and freedoms for Arab citizens. In the end, Western democracy assistance to civil society is meaningless unless regimes allow greater political freedom for those local groups to operate. If one key goal of joint action is to prevent the Arab governments from playing Europe and the United States off against each other, then the transatlantic states must come to common agreement on



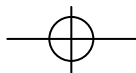
goals regarding the enhancement of political freedom, and also on red lines with respect to Arab executives exercising their current privileges.

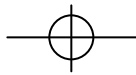
In order to do this, each Western government individually must do a better job of integrating democracy promotion into its bilateral and multilateral diplomacy with the governments of the Middle East.¹⁵ Traditionally, democracy and human rights programs in Western bureaucracies are run separately from regional bureaux, and foreign development assistance is in a third category. As a result, the democracy agenda does not get woven into the day-to-day communications of regional bureaux with their counterparts in the Arab world. An effective democracy assistance policy will have to begin with breaking down these bureaucratic divisions.

But even if the internal structures were in place, could European and US officials present a united front on any significant diplomatic question related to the expansion of political freedom in the region? There is little reason for optimism. Even on issues where they agree strongly on the goals of action and the risks of inaction, such as in dealing with Iran's nuclear program, they do not seem to have much success in implementing joint action in a way that impresses their Middle Eastern interlocutors. Given the inevitable intrusions of local interests, it seems too much to ask that Europe and America should formulate an effective joint response to, for example, Tunisian president Ben Ali's blatant manipulation of the electoral process that gave him a third term in office in October 2004.

More fundamentally, the inability of Western governments so far to persuade their Arab counterparts of the necessity of political rights and freedoms reflects enduring Western ambivalence about the project of democracy promotion, regardless of their declared commitment to that project. Both the US and Europe want to pursue reform, but to pursue it in a way that is not too destabilising and that does not jeopardise other core interests in the region: stability of energy supply, counterterrorist cooperation, Arab-Israeli rapprochement, stabilisation in Iraq. Europeans are often accused of being overly risk averse on this point, whilst Americans are often accused of being reckless. Rhetoric aside, both tend to overvalue the risk of instability and devalue the risk of doing nothing or acceding to local government preferences for glacial paces of progress. A clearer understanding of the possibilities and opportunities for change and a more empirically informed and clear-eyed assessment of Islamist politics in a post-

¹⁵ For more discussion of integrating democracy promotion into foreign policy, see Wittes, "Promise of Arab Liberalism" and M. Durocher Dunne, *Integrating Democracy Promotion into US Middle East Policy*, Carnegie Papers no. 50 (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2004).





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Algerian-civil-war Arab world would help cure Western policymakers of this tendency to discount the risk of allowing the status quo to continue.

If Western states are to commit truly to progressing beyond the status quo in their relations with the Arab world, and commit truly to building a zone of peace, prosperity and progress, then they must invest in it. The paltry sums the United States has today devoted to the Middle East Partnership Initiative and the National Endowment for Democracy are nowhere near to sufficient to establish US credibility, much less US leadership, on this issue. The same point has been made about European investments in democracy programs in the region.¹⁶

An instructive example of the power of investment is evident in the effect on Turkish political development wrought by dangling the carrot of EU accession before the Turkish body politic. The existence of that incentive and its obvious advantages forged a pro-reform coalition out of what had been disparate and often opposing elite social forces: moderate Islamists, the business community, and the human rights community. It may prove impossible to provide a similarly powerful carrot to Arab elites, but none of the current efforts even begin to approach the necessary threshold.

The transatlantic community will only be willing to make the necessary investment to produce effective democracy promotion when they have overcome their own ambivalence about the project itself, and when they have developed and internalised what has only just emerged from the transatlantic diplomacy of the past nine months: an objective articulation of Western self-interest in the goal of reform. Too often, both European and US governments have wished to frame their interventions on this issue as altruistic projects of noblesse oblige or "universal values" rather than as the rational pursuit of self-interest. That has sometimes led to policies that were too hesitant or too tolerant of the prejudices and preferences of their governmental partners in the Arab world. The post-11 September era demands a greater degree of honesty about the self-interest that motivates Western engagement on this issue because, for the peoples of the West and of the Middle East, the self-interest is both obvious and mutual. Honesty about the West's self-regarding interest in Arab reform also requires honesty in evaluating and communicating to Arab counterparts what types of reform do and do not meet Western needs.

In the end, effective democracy promotion by Western states in the Middle East will rely on a clear-eyed and confident sense of why the West cares about this region's political future, and on the transatlantic community's ability to slay the demons outlined above: the shadow of Islamist politics and the consequences of reform for other Western interests in the Middle East.

¹⁶ Youngs, *Europe's Uncertain Pursuit*.

