

*Most democracy promotion tools available to United States policymakers were developed to assist transitions in central and Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa, and East Asia. Are they likely to be helpful in the Arab world? If so, why? If not, what sort of modifications or substitutions are needed?*

Good policies are not Procrustean beds. U.S. policymakers must accommodate reality in constructing strategies and approaches, and they must acknowledge that context dictates effective tactics. Yet U.S. policymakers have not exercised this responsibility in their approaches to the Arab world, and they have allowed a disposition towards democratic consolidation to adversely affect both their policies and, more importantly, their expectations for success. There exists a key contextual contrast that U.S. policymakers have not yet widely accepted: whereas in many parts of Latin America, East Asia, Africa and Central and Eastern Europe, the U.S. promoted democracy by aiding consolidation in a transition or post-transition context, there is no such extant democratic framework in the predominantly authoritarian Arab world. Put simply, U.S. policymakers would be ill advised to treat the Arab world as they have treated other regions where the effects of democratic transition were present already. First, policymakers must acknowledge the reality of this context and, second, they must pursue a robust policy of engagement to help create institutions essential to democracy that are now largely absent in the Arab world.

Authoritarianism in the Arab world has proven remarkably resilient to challenges and shocks over the past two centuries. Where democracy has shown signs of development elsewhere, it has shown few signs of viability and life in the Middle East and North Africa. Israel and Lebanon are exceptions in the region rather than the rule. In the former-Soviet states, and in much of Latin America, Africa, and East Asia, U.S. policymakers were faced with the challenge of democratic *consolidation* during or after a significant transition. These transitions created a context of potentially viable democracy. Democracy, one might say, was “in the air” as the prevailing conceptual framework for future governmental development. We saw this to be the case after the collapse of the Soviet Union, after post-colonial independence in some African states, through various military coups and student uprisings in South Korea, and through the collapse of military regimes in parts of

Latin America. The democratic context was often already a feature of the political topography when U.S. policymakers addressed how best to promote democracy, and successes in places such as Poland and South Korea led these policymakers to take such a topography for granted.

This has created a disposition among U.S. policymakers towards consolidation, and failures in Iraq since 2003 have made this clearer than ever before. True, the U.S. did initiate the transition, but U.S. policy quickly shifted towards premature democratic consolidation despite the lack of a complete transition. This was evident, for example, when the Iraqi army was disbanded, compromising Iraq's ability to maintain security, and elections were pressed into the foreground of political discourse before the state possessed essential institutions with respect to such issues as domestic security and energy infrastructure. Though it is not the first example that has done so, Iraq has shown us that even forcefully toppling an authoritarian regime does not ensure that a democratic framework will take root. Policymakers have failed to recognize the impotence of promoting democratic learning in an authoritarian or semi-authoritarian context *when compared to* comparable efforts in a nascent democratic context. In other words, this disposition towards consolidation has skewed expectations of success by causing policymakers to believe that consolidation efforts will work where such efforts are actually inappropriate.

Two modifications must be applied to policies in the Arab world; the first applies to analytic expectations, the second to policy approaches. First, the authoritarianism of the Arab world has proven resilient to both exogenous and endogenous shocks or trends that might lead to the emergence of a democratic framework. The entrenchment of elite-driven politics and a refusal to embrace free market policies are important contributing factors to this resilience. Democratic transitions, it follows, are not guaranteed and, even if they were, they are difficult to predict, meaning we must treat the “pre-transitional” (to use an inherently biased term) character of the Arab world as a fixture rather than as an anomaly that will soon erode.

Second, the fact that the U.S. has extensive experience in democratic consolidation does not mean that we should apply this experience unconditionally to the Arab world. Democracy promotion entails building essential institutions, such as dependable police forces, judicial systems, and educational organizations, many of which are absent in Arab states. U.S. policymakers will not encourage the creation and expansion of such institutions through hostile rhetoric and condemnations of Arab governments, but through engagement with the elites who hold power in these states. This entails continued humanitarian efforts as well as gradually creating incentive structures, i.e. through careful diplomatic and economic pressure and engagement, which encourage elites to make concessions benefiting the growth of these essential institutions. The U.S. should not adopt a policy of appeasement, but it must recognize the implications of promoting literacy, metaphorically speaking, where elites decide which books are on the shelves.

Furthermore, the U.S. should recognize that creating these incentive structures is something that it cannot do on its own. Policymakers should make their democracy promotion plans more robust by incorporating a strategy to improve U.S. relations with Europe. Unilateral incentive structures offered by the U.S. will be ignored if Arab elites can afford to do so by turning elsewhere for support and resources. Better U.S.-Europe cooperation could limit the scope of these alternatives.

The modifications I recommend largely concern prevailing attitudes that are misleading. The reality on the ground is that the Arab world is not at a stage where the lessons of democratic consolidation are relevant and applicable. When this is acknowledged and accepted, U.S. policymakers can begin the difficult process of constructing approaches to the Arab world with more reasonable, though not certain, expectations of success.