



**PERCEPTIONS OF U.S. DEMOCRACY PROMOTION
PART ONE: MIDDLE EASTERN VIEWS**

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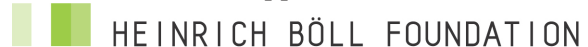
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THE PROJECT ON MIDDLE EAST DEMOCRACY is a non-partisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to examining the impact of American policy on political reform and democratization in the Middle East. Through dialogue, policy analysis, and advocacy, we aim to promote understanding of how genuine, authentic democracies can develop in the Middle East and how the U.S. can best support that process.

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Executive Summary

Though Middle Easterners desire democracy and seek to reform their own political systems, public opinion data show that they are also unhappy with American democracy promotion efforts, and that they believe the U.S. does not genuinely and consistently support democratic reform. Analysis of this polling data suggests that the U.S. needs to seriously reassess its impact on political reform in the region. This paper concludes that:

- The U.S. should be consistent in supporting democracy, both within each country and across the region.
- The U.S. should acknowledge that peaceful means are the only legitimate methods of supporting democracy abroad.
- The U.S. should accept democratic outcomes and engage democratically elected governments.

Introduction

Middle Easterners desire democracy and political reform, as the polling data in this paper demonstrate. Nevertheless, they are deeply critical of American involvement in reform in the region. Middle Easterners nearly universally greet any mention of American promotion of democracy with skepticism and suspicion, if not outright hostility.

This widespread distrust is a legacy of three things: America's historic support for Arab autocrats, the conflation of democracy promotion with the Iraq war, and the perceived unwillingness of America to accept democratic outcomes.

Historic U.S. support for friendly Arab autocrats continues to this day. The U.S. has a tight diplomatic and military alliance with the absolute monarchy in Saudi Arabia. Middle Easterners are well aware that Egypt and Jordan receive millions of dollars in American assistance annually. Iranians remember America's staunch support for the Shah, and its sponsorship of a coup against democratically elected prime minister Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953. America's continuing relationships with Middle Eastern autocrats make U.S. pro-democracy rhetoric appear inconsistent with reality, and thus skeptical Middle Easterners search for ulterior American motives.

Since 2003, many Middle Easterners associate U.S. "democracy promotion" with America's occupation of Iraq. Needless to say, no Middle Easterners want to imitate

the situation they see in Iraq, regardless of the fact that democratic elections were held there. When no weapons of mass destruction were found, the administration tried to justify the war *ex post facto* as a war for democracy, thereby conflating "democracy promotion" with war in many Middle Easterners' minds. American calls for democracy in other states are often interpreted as the prelude to war.

And in the early 1990s, America tacitly accepted the Algerian military's annulment of an Islamist election victory, setting a precedent of not accepting democratic outcomes that were not in its self-interest. The Bush administration's response to Hamas's victory in the Palestinian elections last year has reinforced that perception. America's refusal to engage the most freely and fairly elected Arab government is interpreted by many in the region as meaning that only U.S.-friendly democratic outcomes are legitimate. The American distinction between recognizing the electoral outcome as legitimate, which it has done, and engaging a Hamas government, which it has not, is not accepted in the Middle East.

Public Opinion Data Analysis

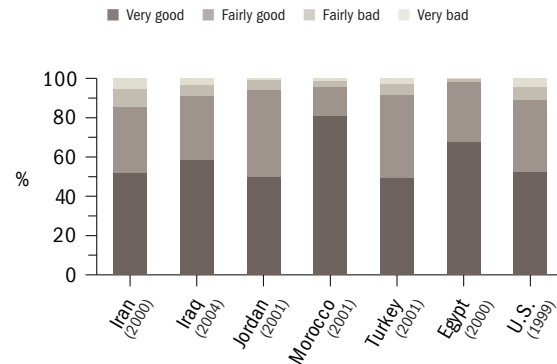
I. Middle Easterners prefer democracy

The notion that Middle Easterners do not value democracy is relatively common in the U.S. Some argue that, for religious, cultural or historical reasons, Middle Easterners prefer dictators or monarchs to rule them rather than ruling themselves.

Yet the World Values Survey shows unequivocally that Middle Easterners desire democracy.¹ While 52.4% of Americans think that a democratic political system is a “very good” way to govern the U.S., over 80% of Moroccans believe that democracy is a very good way to govern Morocco; 67.9% of Egyptians believe democracy is a very good way to govern Egypt; and 58.6% of Iraqis believe democracy is a very good way to govern Iraq.² See Figure 1. In no Middle Eastern country surveyed did less than 49% of the people believe that democracy was “very good.”

These results are confirmed in another question, in which Middle Easterners in almost every country feel strongly that “Democracy may have problems, but it’s better than any other form of government.”³ While 41.6% of Americans strongly agree with this statement, that is dwarfed by the number of

Figure 1: Preference for Democratic Political System



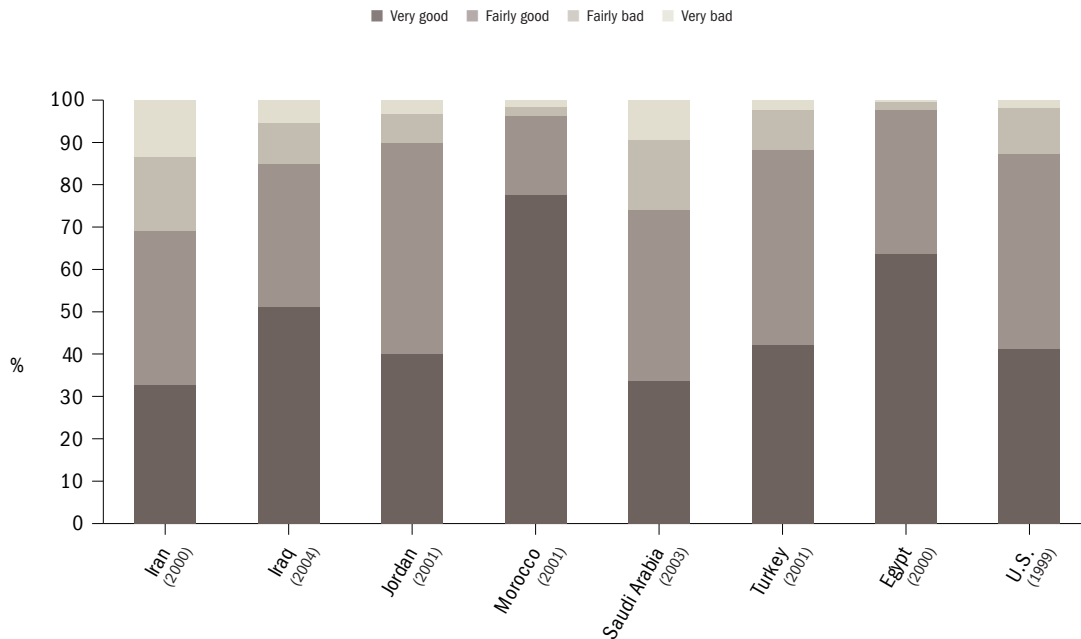
Source: World Values Survey.

¹The World Values Survey is a single survey administered in a wide variety of countries across the world, making data from each country comparable. Results have been reported four times since 1985, with the most recent report in 2005. In the Middle East, the World Values Surveys referred to in this paper were carried out in Egypt in 2000; Iran in 2000; Iraq in 2004; Jordan in 2001; Morocco in 2001; Saudi Arabia in 2003; Turkey in 2001. The U.S. survey was carried out in 1999. For each question, crosstabs are used, by “samples of [country].”

²World Values Survey, question E117: “I’m going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing this country. For each one, would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country? Having a democratic political system.”

³World Values Survey, question E123: “I’m going to read off some things that people sometimes say about a democratic political system. Could you please tell me if you agree strongly, agree, disagree or disagree strongly, after I read each one of them? Democracy may have problems but it’s better than any other form of government.”

Figure 2: Democracy Has Problems, But Is Best Form of Government



Source: World Values Survey.

Moroccans (77.6%), Egyptians (63.6%), and Iraqis (51.2%) who strongly agree that democracy is better than any other form of government. See Figure 2. In every country, the number of people who responded positively⁴ exceeded 69%, including Jordan (89.9%), Turkey (88.3%), Saudi Arabia (74.2%), and Iran (69.2%).

In 2007, substantial majorities in Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, and the Palestinian Territories said that democracy was not just a “Western way of doing things,” and could work well in their countries.⁵ See Figures 3a and 3b. Time-series data show that from 1999-2005, in most of the countries surveyed, people became more optimistic that democracy could work

well in their country. In the West Bank and Gaza, after the election of Hamas in January 2006, Figure 3b shows that respondents in 2007 were significantly more optimistic about whether democracy would work for them than they had been in 2003, the last time this question was asked there. From 2006-2007, however, there was an erosion of optimism among people in Egypt, Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon about how well democracy would work.

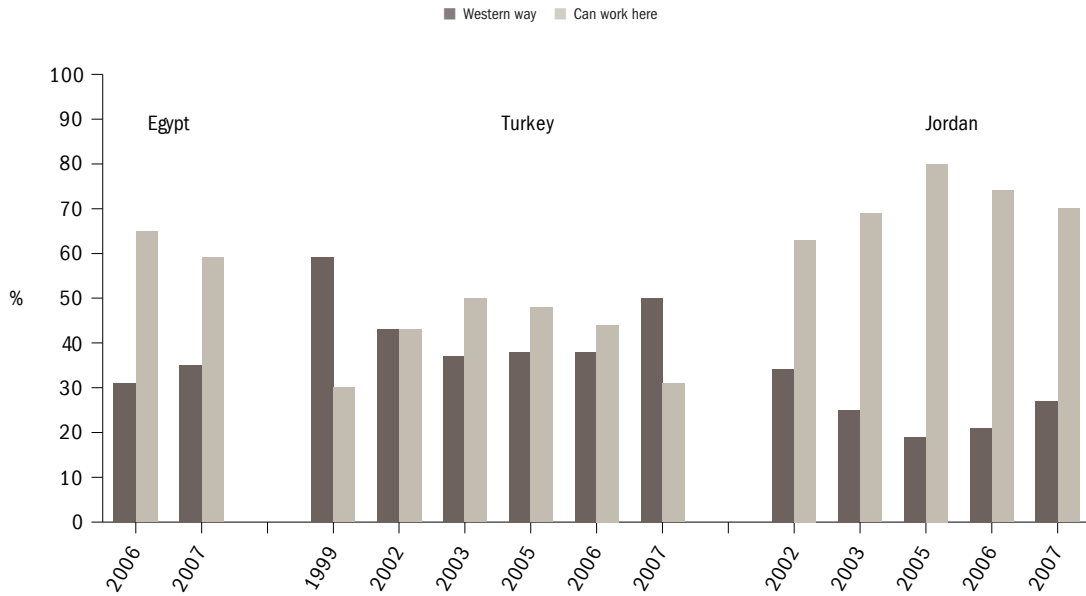
It is important to note, however, that while Middle Easterners like the idea of democracy, they generally dislike American ideas about democracy.⁶ See Figure 4. From 2002-2007, sizeable majorities in Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, and the Palestinian

⁴Responded positively includes “strongly agree” and “agree.”

⁵Pew Global Attitudes Project, “Final 2007 Trends Topline.” Oct. 4, 2007. This time-series data is part of a periodic 47-nation survey conducted from 1999 through 2007. The 2007 surveys were conducted in April and May in Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, and the Palestinian Territories. The surveys in these countries had a margin of error of +/- 3% with a 95% confidence interval (except for the survey in Kuwait, which had a margin of +/- 4%). The surveys were conducted by face-to-face interviews, except in Kuwait, where they were both face-to-face and telephone interviews. Question 49: “Some people in our country feel that democracy is a Western way of doing things that would not work here – others think that democracy is not just for the West and can work well here. Which comes closer to your opinion?”

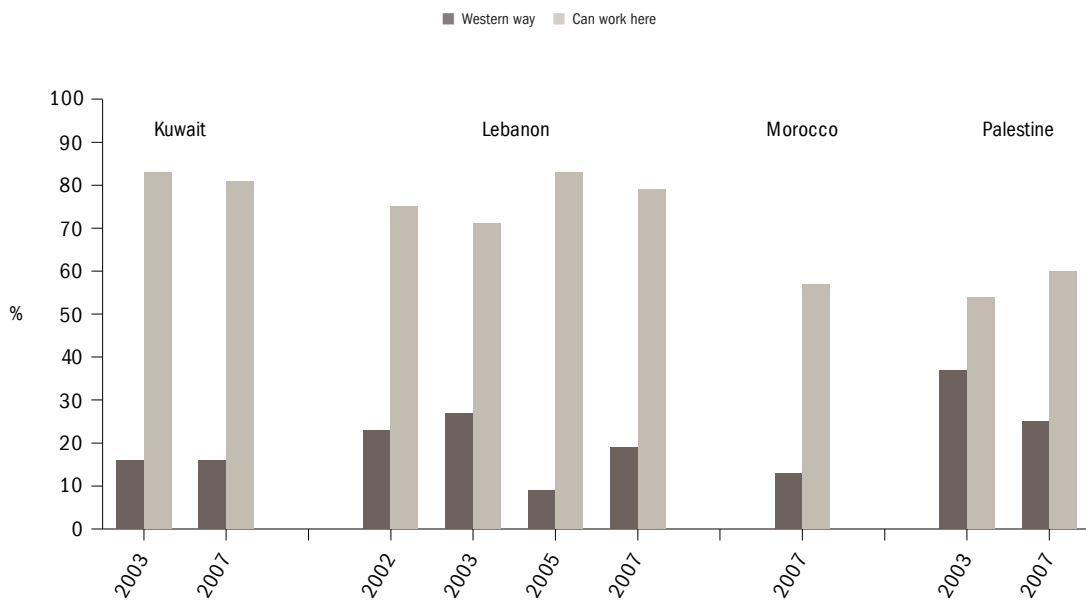
⁶Pew Global Attitudes Project, “Final 2007 Trends Topline.” June 27, 2007. Question 26: “And which of these comes closer to your view? I like American ideas about democracy, OR I dislike American ideas about democracy?”

Figure 3a: Can Democracy Work Here?



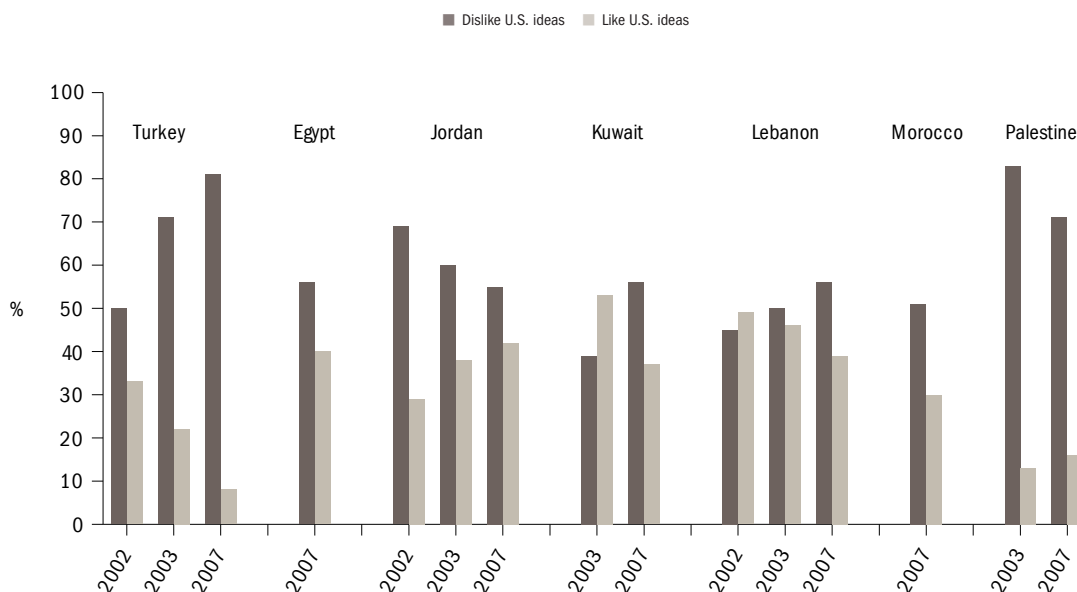
Source: Pew Global Attitudes Project, "Final 2007 Trends Topline." October 4, 2007.

Figure 3b: Can Democracy Work Here?



Source: Pew Global Attitudes Project, "Final 2007 Trends Topline." October 4, 2007.

Figure 4: Like/Dislike U.S. Ideas about Democracy



Source: Pew Global Attitudes Project, "Final 2007 Trends Topline." June 27, 2007.

Territories disliked U.S. ideas about democracy; the contest was only close in Kuwait and Lebanon. The trend-lines are negative in every country in the region for which time-series data is available, except for Jordan, where people are increasingly open to U.S. ideas about democracy. The data indicates that Middle Easterners do not believe Americans have a monopoly on the meaning of democracy; they like the concept but disagree with America's interpretation of it.

In arguing that Middle Easterners prefer democracy, it is worth analyzing what Middle Easterners perceive democracy to be. In many cases, Middle Easterners mean substantially the same thing as Westerners when they discuss democracy. In Jordan, for example, 57% of respondents to a University

of Jordan poll in July 2006 identified "civil rights and political liberties" as one of the top three things that democracy means to them.⁷ Likewise, respondents ranked America, Israel and Lebanon as more democratic than their own country, Jordan, a finding that would be expected to correspond with Western views.⁸

In other ways, Middle Eastern interpretations of democracy may differ significantly from Western ideas of democracy. For example, a Gallup poll found that more than 65% of respondents in each Middle Eastern country surveyed, with the exception of Turkey, wanted the shari'a (Islamic law) to be at least a source, if not the only source, of legislation.⁹ In Egypt and Jordan, majorities wanted the shari'a to be the only source of

⁷Other options included "justice & equality," "development," and "security & stability." "Democracy in Jordan 2006" public opinion poll, Center for Strategic Studies, University of Jordan, p. 3. The "Democracy in Jordan 2006" poll was conducted during June 27 – July 1, 2006. It surveyed 1,115 respondents with a margin of error of +/-3%.

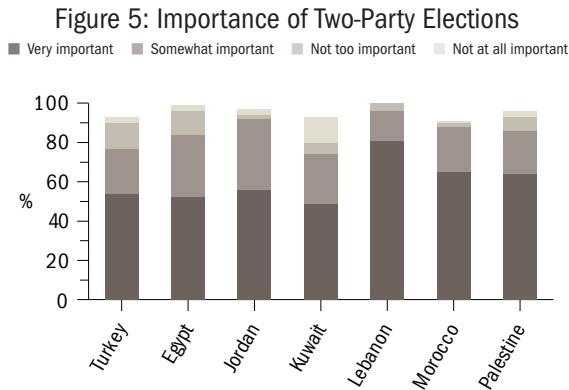
⁸"Democracy in Jordan 2006," p. 5.

⁹Gallup World Poll, "Islam and Democracy," 2006. The Middle Eastern countries in which this question was asked are Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Iran, Turkey, and Lebanon. Question: "In general, which of these statements comes closest to your point of view? Sharia must be the only source of legislation; sharia must be a source of legislation, but not the only source; sharia should not be a source of legislation."

legislation. The same poll, however, found the respondents almost unanimous in desiring constitutionally protected freedom of speech¹⁰ and having little enthusiasm for religious leaders having a direct role in drafting their country's constitution.¹¹ Islamic scholars and Islamist movements differ widely on what constitutes the shari'a, whether and how it can be updated to accord with a modern environment, and who has the authority to do so.

II. Middle Easterners seek political reform.

Middle Easterners across the region overwhelmingly say they find it important to live in a state where "honest elections are held regularly with a choice of at least two political parties."¹² See Figure 5. Ratings

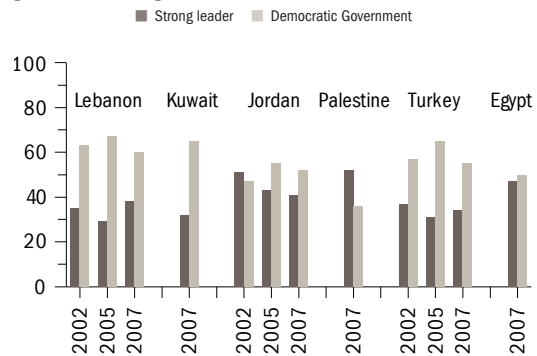


Source: Pew Global Attitudes Project, "Final 2007 Trends Topline." Oct. 4, 2007.

are similarly high for the importance of the freedom of the press, freedom of worship, freedom of speech (with the exception of Kuwait), and an independent judiciary.¹³

When forced to choose between a strong leader and a democratic government (surely a false choice), Middle Easterners are more evenly split, but most still prefer a democratic government.¹⁴ See Figure 6.

Figure 6: Strong Leader or Democratic Government?



Source: Pew Global Attitudes Project, "Final 2007 Trends Topline." Oct. 4, 2007.

Trend lines point towards slightly more support for democracy in Jordan, but gradually increasing support for "strong leadership" in Turkey and Lebanon.

In every Middle East country covered by the World Values Survey, a plurality of people said that "a high level of economic growth" should be their country's top priority over the next ten years, compared to military strength, political reform, or envi-

¹⁰No more than 10% of respondents in any Middle Eastern country disagreed with protecting freedom of speech, defined as "allowing all citizens to express their opinions on political, social, and economic issues of the day." Gallup World Poll, "Islam and Democracy," 2006. Question: "Suppose that someday you were asked to help draft a new constitution for a new country. As I read you a list of possible provisions that might be included in a new constitution, would you tell me whether you would probably agree or not agree with the inclusion of each of these provisions? Freedom of speech."

¹¹At least 50% of respondents in each country said they desired religious leaders to have no direct role in the constitution-drafting process. Gallup World Poll, "Islam and Democracy," 2006. Question: "In the area of drafting the country's constitution, do you think you would probably recommend that the role of religious leaders should be direct, adviser, or no direct role?"

¹²Pew Global Attitudes Project, "Final 2007 Trends Topline." Oct. 4, 2007. Question 47b: "How important is it to you to live in a country where honest elections are held regularly with a choice of at least two political parties?"

¹³Pew Global Attitudes Project, "Final 2007 Trends Topline." Oct. 4, 2007. Questions 47a-f.

¹⁴Pew Global Attitudes Project, "Final 2007 Trends Topline." Oct. 4, 2007. Question 51: "Some feel that we should rely on a democratic form of government to solve our country's problems. Others feel that we should rely on a leader with a strong hand to solve our country's problems. Which comes closer to your opinion?"

ronmental protection.¹⁵ Likewise, when given the straight-up choice in 2007 between a “good democracy” and a “strong economy,” more Middle Easterners in every country surveyed (except Kuwait) chose the latter.¹⁶ But in the World Values Survey, a sizeable percentage of people chose political reform – “people have more say about how things are done” – as their top priority, including 20.2% in Iran and 19.6% in Saudi Arabia.¹⁷ See Figure 7. In Iran, this exceeded the number of

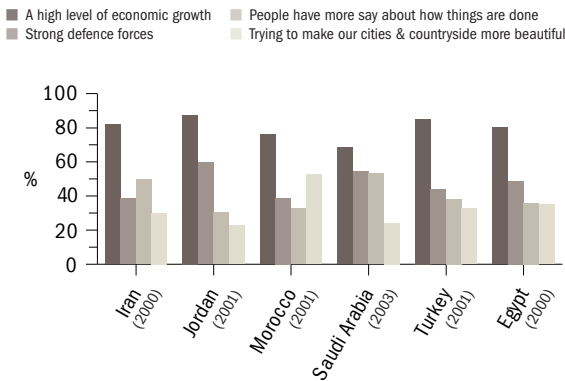
ties, and in both Iran and Saudi Arabia about 50% of the people chose it first or second.

When the regional results are averaged together and weighted by population, the political reform option comes in third. Just over 40% of people in the Middle East would choose political reform as one of their two top priorities, while nearly as many as would choose “strong defense forces” (44.5%).¹⁸ See Figure 8.

Middle Easterners are not happy

Figure 7: National Priority Preferences

(Weighted Average - Percent choosing each priority as one of their top two)



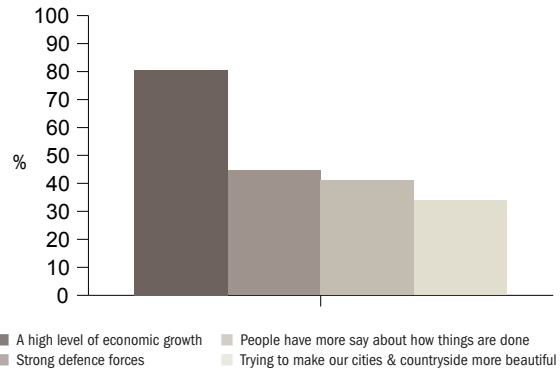
Source: World Values Survey.

people who chose “strong defense forces” as their top priority.

When asked their second priority, pluralities of Iranians (29.5%), Saudis (33.5%) and Egyptians (25.5%) chose “people have more say about how things are done.” When people’s first and second priorities are combined, at least 30% in each country chose political reform as one of their top two priori-

Figure 8: Middle East National Priorities

(Weighted Average - Percent choosing each priority as one of their top two)



Source: Author’s calculations based on World Values Survey data.

ties, and in both Iran and Saudi Arabia about 50% of the people chose it first or second. With the exception of Egypt,²⁰ less than 10% in each country²¹ said that they were “very satisfied” with how democracy has been developing. See Figure 9. More than half of the Turkish citizens surveyed said that they were “not at all” satisfied with how democracy has been developing, and a

¹⁵World Values Survey, question E001: “People sometimes talk about what the aims of this country should be for the next ten years. On this card are listed some of the goals which different people would give top priority. Would you please say which one of these you, yourself, consider the most important?”

¹⁶Pew Global Attitudes Project, “Final 2007 Trends Topline.” Oct. 4, 2007. Question 50: “If you had to choose between a good democracy and a strong economy, which would you say is more important?”

¹⁷World Values Survey, question E001: “People sometimes talk about what the aims of this country should be for the next ten years. On this card are listed some of the goals which different people would give top priority. Would you please say which one of these you, yourself, consider the most important?”

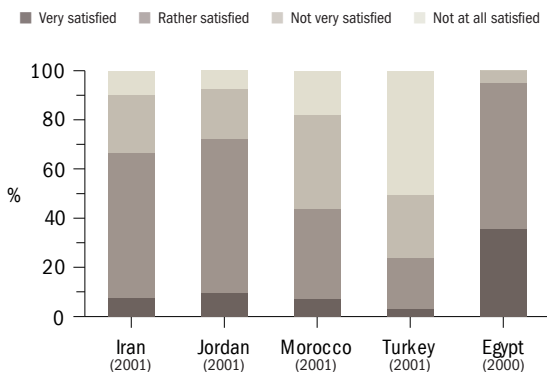
¹⁸Author’s calculations based on World Values Survey data.

¹⁹World Values Survey, question E110: “On the whole are you very satisfied, rather satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy is developing in our country?”

²⁰In Egypt, 35.5% of the citizens surveyed said that they were “very satisfied” with the way democracy has been developing.

²¹This question was not asked in Saudi Arabia.

Figure 9: Satisfaction with Democratic Development



Source: World Values Survey.

plurality of Moroccans (38.2%) said that they were “not very satisfied” with democracy’s progression in Morocco. Majorities said that they were “rather satisfied” with democratic development in Iran (59%), Jordan (62.5%) and Egypt (59.3%).

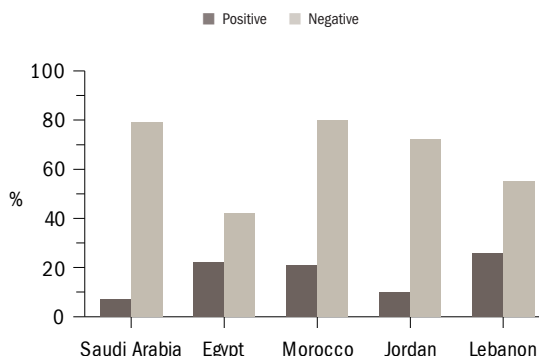
Large majorities in many Middle Eastern countries with parliaments believe that reforms are needed to make parliamentary elections more democratic. In Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Morocco, over 70% agreed that “reforms are needed to enhance representation and participation in parliamentary elections.”²²

III. Middle Easterners are unhappy with American democracy promotion efforts

A November 2006 Zogby poll suggests that U.S efforts to promote democracy in the region have been perceived negatively by Middle Easterners.²³ In no country did more than 26% of the respondents say that

the “promotion of democracy” had a positive effect on their overall opinion of America, and the percentage of respondents saying that U.S. democracy promotion had a negative effect on their opinion ranged from 42%

Figure 10: Views of U.S. Democracy Promotion



Source: Zogby International, “Five Nation Survey of the Middle East,” December 2006.

in Egypt to 80% in Morocco. See Figure 10.

The region-wide average, weighted by population, shows about 19% saying that U.S. democracy promotion had a positive effect on their overall opinion of America; 58% said it had a negative effect.²⁴

In several countries, there is a dramatic disconnect between Middle Easterners’ feelings about American democracy and about how the U.S. promotes democracy. For example, the same question in the Zogby 2006 poll shows that Saudis admire American freedoms: 41% said that American freedom and democracy had improved their overall opinion of the U.S., while 31% said that it made a negative impression.²⁵ See Fig-

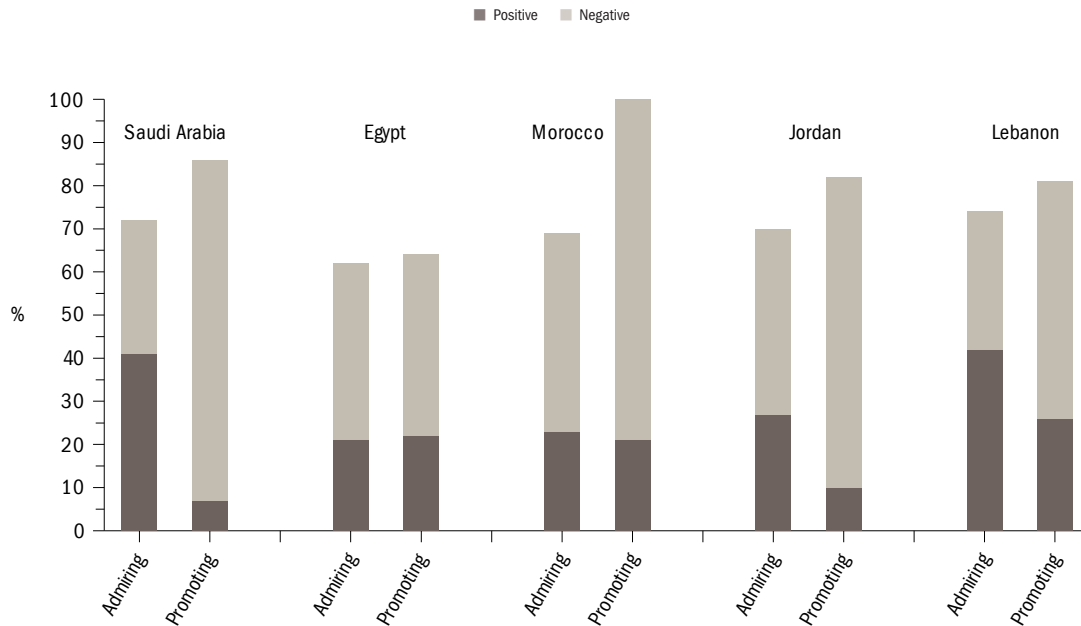
²²IFES and the Arab Center for the Rule of Law and Integrity, “Promoting Rule of Law and Integrity in the Middle East and North Africa,” Jan 3, 2007, slide 30. Sample sizes of 800 for Egypt, 400 for Jordan, 400 for Lebanon, and 800 for Morocco.

²³Zogby International, “Five Nation Survey of the Middle East,” December 2006. The question gauged the degree to which ten different factors, including ‘the American people,’ ‘American products,’ and ‘Palestinian policy’ impacted people’s opinions of the U.S. The results may be biased by, apparently, being asked directly after respondents’ perceptions of U.S. Palestinian policy, Lebanon policy, and Iraq policy – three subjects that provoked extremely negative responses. Question 3: “On a scale of 1-5 where 1 is ‘very negatively’ and 5 is ‘very positively,’ how do each of the following shape your overall opinion of the United States?” Surveys in each country were conducted through face-to-face surveys in Nov. 2006. Sample design and size varied for each country, and margin of error for each survey ranged from +/- 3.5% to +/- 4.7% with a confidence interval of 95%.

²⁴Author’s calculations based on Zogby 2006 polling data.

²⁵Zogby 2006, question 3: “On a scale of 1-5 where 1 is ‘very negatively’ and 5 is ‘very positively,’ how do each of the following shape your overall opinion of the United States?”

Figure 11: Admiring vs. Promoting Democracy



Source: Zogby International, "Five Nation Survey of the Middle East," December 2006.

ure 11. In the same question, however, only 7% of Saudis said that America’s promotion of democracy had a positive impact on their overall opinion of the U.S. – compared to 79% who said the opposite. With the exception of Egypt, this stark divergence between admiration for American democracy and for American democracy promotion can be seen in each country.

IV. Middle Easterners believe that the U.S. does not sincerely support democratic reform.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, there is a widespread and powerful perception in the Middle East that the U.S. is not sincere in supporting democratic reform. While the Bush administration trumpets its creation of “democracy” in Iraq, most Middle Easterners view an American occupation

as inherently undemocratic. Outside Iraq, the administration’s verbal commitments to freedom and democracy were insufficient to convince Middle Easterners that the U.S. genuinely supported democratic reforms among America’s autocratic allies.

For example, in one 2004 poll, a majority of respondents in each of the five countries surveyed said that the U.S. does not “support the practice of democracy in the world.”²⁶ In Syria, Palestine and Egypt, the percentage of respondents saying that the U.S. supports democracy was less than 30%.²⁷

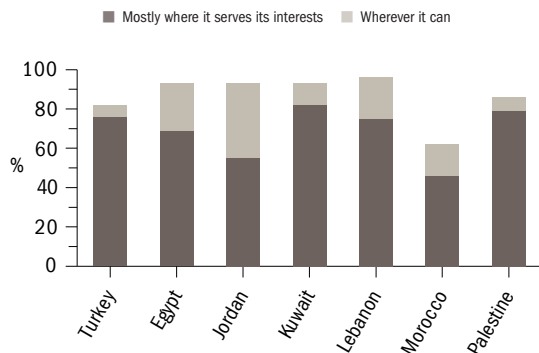
To most observers in the region, the Bush administration’s about-face in early 2006 after Hamas was elected merely confirmed what they already believed: that the U.S. promotes democracy mostly where democracy serves U.S. interests, rather than promoting it consistently across the region.²⁸

²⁶Center for Strategic Studies, University of Jordan, “Revisiting the Arab Street: Research from Within,” 2005, p. 70. Table V.1: Attitudes toward the Western Foreign Policies, National Samples.” Survey was conducted from March – June 2004 in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Egypt. Each national sample consisted of 1,200 people.

²⁷“Revisiting the Arab Street,” Figure V.2: Percentage of Respondents Agreeing with Statements about U.S. Foreign Policy, by Sample, p. 72.

²⁸Pew Global Attitudes Project, “Final 2007 Trends Topline.” June 27, 2007. Question 32: “And which comes closer to describing your view? The United States promotes democracy wherever it can, or the United States promotes democracy mostly where it serves its interests?”

Figure 12: The U.S. promotes democracy...



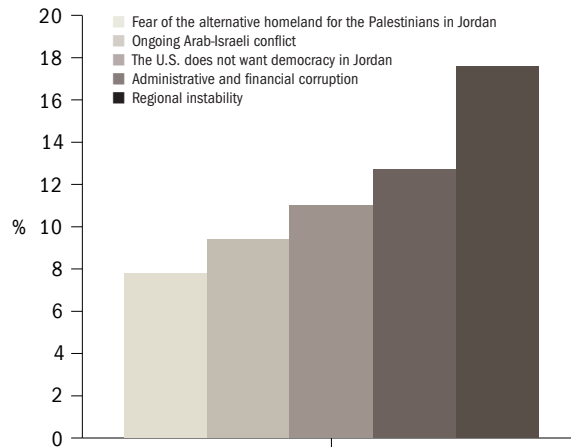
Source: Pew Global Attitudes Project, "Final 2007 Trends Topline." June 27, 2007.

See Figure 12. This belief, a logical response to America's position on Hamas and its recent embrace of undemocratic "moderates," engenders skepticism about U.S. consistency and credibility as a supporter of political reform.²⁹

These results have been confirmed in national polls. For example, in a 2006 poll, "the U.S. does not support democracy in Jordan" was the third-most chosen "obstacle

to democracy" in Jordan.³⁰ See Figure 13. Eleven percent of respondents chose American opposition to democracy as the largest obstacle, trailing only "regional instability" at 17.6% and "administrative and financial corruption" at 12.7%.

Figure 13: Obstacles to Democracy in Jordan



Source: Center for Strategic Studies, University of Jordan. "Democracy in Jordan 2006." Note: Responses chosen by less than 5% of the participants are omitted.

²⁹Most Americans have few illusions, either, about U.S. democracy promotion efforts, though slightly more Americans believe the U.S. is consistently pro-democracy than do Middle Easterners. In the same poll, 30% of Americans said that the U.S. promotes democracy wherever it can; 63% said that the U.S. promotes democracy mostly where it serves its interests.

³⁰"Democracy in Jordan 2006," p. 8. Other responses to the question were "fear of Islamist control of parliament" (4.9%); "presence of tribalism in society" (4.9%); "lack of political elites' desire to have democracy in Jordan" (4.5%); "lack of state seriousness to achieve democracy" (4.5%); "incompatibility of democracy with the society's culture" (4.4%); "society's lack of readiness to practice democracy" (4%); "lack of economic elites' desire to have democracy in Jordan" (3%); "ongoing instability in Iraq" (2.5%); and "lack of democracy in neighboring countries" (1.7%).

Conclusion

A broad and overarching realignment of American policy is needed to convince Middle Easterners that the U.S. sincerely and genuinely supports democracy in the region. The polling data suggests several conclusions.

First, the U.S. should be consistent in supporting democracy, both within each country and across the region. Middle Easterners strongly doubt that the U.S. genuinely supports democracy in the region. Increased American funding for traditional “democracy promotion” programs from organizations like USAID and NED will not be sufficient to change their perceptions. Middle Easterners rightly see the inconsistency between traditional democratic development programs, on the one hand, and massive American aid to authoritarian governments, close U.S. cooperation with repressive security services, and arms sales to undemocratic regimes on the other. While traditional “democracy promotion” programs are an important part of the equation, to regain its credibility on Middle East democracy, the U.S. must examine and reassess the full range of its policies toward undemocratic states.

The U.S. must also support democracy consistently across the region. American calls for democratic progress in adversarial states like Iran and Syria are not credible if they are not accompanied by similar policies toward America’s undemocratic allies. American praise for merely symbolic

or superficial reforms will be unconvincing.

Second, the U.S. should acknowledge that peaceful means are the only legitimate methods of supporting democracy abroad. This would be a first step toward de-conflating the Iraq war and American support of democracy in the Middle East. Rather than attempting to justify the Iraq war ex post facto as an attempt to spread democracy, the next administration should acknowledge that the Iraq war was undertaken largely because of a perceived security threat, and that perception was based on badly misinformed intelligence. At the same time, the U.S. should explicitly disavow the use of force to promote democracy in any other country. Such a policy would return to the best tradition of American use of force – after all, the U.S. entered World War II in response to the attack on Pearl Harbor, not to build democracy in Japan and Germany.

Third, the U.S. should accept democratic outcomes and engage democratically elected governments. The victory of terrorist, anti-American and morally repugnant organizations like Hamas in free and fair elections, coming after U.S. calls for democracy and American pressure to allow the Palestinian elections to go forward, poses a serious dilemma. It raises the question of what it really means to “accept” a democratic outcome. At one extreme, as the Bush administration rightly realized, the U.S. must acknowledge the outcome of the elec-

tions, as it has done with Hamas. On the other hand, the U.S. is not obligated to give foreign aid to any government, much less one headed by a movement which refuses to renounce terrorism. But between those two extremes, the U.S. would gain much credibility on democracy if it spoke with all democratically elected governments without preconditions.

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