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U.S. DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper is based on the results of the internship Policy Project conducted at the Armenian Center for National and International Studies (ACNIS).

Even though improvements have been identified during recent years in the Middle East, it has always been the one of the most troublesome regions of the world, where building democracy has been a dilemma that did not emerge. Previously, the U.S. has been prioritizing stability in the region over promoting democracy. However, in the last several years this policy of stability has been changed. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the U.S. determined that the lack of democracy and the existing authoritarian regimes in the Middle East are not only upholding instability in the region, but are a national security threat for the U.S. as well. As a result, promoting and building democracy in the Middle East has become one of the leading objectives of U.S. foreign policy.

The objective of this paper is to analyze the U.S. policies and initiatives for promoting democracy in the Middle East that have been designated as a national security priority. It will observe the status of human rights and democracy and will examine how the U.S. democracy promotion efforts are implemented in the Middle East, particularly in two Arab countries: Saudi Arabia and Syria. It will also analyze the scope of pressure exerted by the U.S. on the two countries to comply democratic procedures and human rights violations.

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The attempt to simplify the explanation of democracy and to formulate the basic condition upon which it rests would be articulated as political equality. Dahl (1989) defines the logic of political equality as the belief that all the members of the society must be sufficiently eligible to have equal opportunities with the others to participate in the process of leading the association. According to Dahl (1989), there are five criteria that mark a democratic process: voting equality, effective participation, enlightened understanding, control of the agenda, and inclusion of all adult members in the making of collective decisions. These criteria make the democratic process fully consistent with the logic of political equality. Violating any of these criteria not only renders the process undemocratic, but also makes it incompatible with the logic of political equality.

A state is considered democratic when it enjoys a universal suffrage that encompasses everyone in the decision-making process. Providing an equal chance to cast ballot and have a free and fair elections do not necessarily mean that democracy is fully actualized. Instead, everyone must have an equal access to the decision-making process as well as deliver and obtain enough information to be able to participate in that process.

Democracy is a form of government where all decisions made by the state are pertained directly or indirectly by the majority of its citizens through free and fair elections and without oppressing the rights of the minority groups. As Sartori (1987) illustrates, it is the majority rule, in addition protecting the minority rights, with democratically elected accountable representatives.

The preceding features indicate that citizens have the right to change their government by democratic means. Nevertheless, while observing the Arab world, it is clear that these factors are seldom present and the Arab society does not embrace the beliefs that are the necessary prerequisites for a democracy. For instance, these countries have elections and

voting; but they just do not have counting, or they have selective counting, which produces 99 percent votes in favor of the ruler.

The Arab world has a very long non-democratic experience and the promotion of democracy in the Middle East is a complex issue which includes many outstanding questions. The problem lies in the fact that not only the above-mentioned fundamental precepts of democracy are completely absent in the Middle East, but there also is a dilemma and reluctance toward such reforms.

The United States, on its part, supports and promotes democracy everywhere by providing political and economic assistance. In his second inaugural address, U.S. President George W. Bush stated, “it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world” (President Sworn-In to Second Term, 2005).

This American policy has been growing stronger in the last five years. Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the U.S. has significantly increased the magnitude of democracy promotion, particularly in the Middle East.

Today, political reform is somehow penetrating in the Middle East and the process of democratization is ahead. In spite of this, the functioning measures are still restrained given the fact that Arab governments are still striving to “curb political participation, manipulate elections, and limit freedom of expression because they do not want their power challenged” (Carothers and Ottaway, 2004). Despite the spread of debates over reform, authoritarian regimes continue to assumingly nurture political reforms without changing the ultimate distribution of power. “Some regimes—notably Saudi Arabia’s—move quickly to clamp down on any nascent liberal debate. Others are more tolerant, giving liberals some intellectual space to write and discuss issues openly, as long as their talk is not followed by action” (Carothers and Ottaway, 2004).

In the last five years the Middle East has experienced slight political reforms as a result of the increasing internal debates about the need to reform in the Arab world on one hand, and the U.S. efforts of building democracy on the other. In 2006 the Freedom House reports that although the region continues to suffer from a marked deficit of freedom, this progress was overall the most significant development. Albeit none of them have yet approached the status of a free society, the Middle East has seen a modest but notable increase in political rights and civil liberties (Puddington, 2006).

Before 9/11 the U.S. diplomatic efforts and aid in the Middle East have been targeted mostly at supporting the regulation of and realizing a peace treaty between Israel and Palestine and maintaining stability with friendly Arab authoritarian regimes. Democracy promotion and political reform have been secondary priorities at that point. However, after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the U.S. revised its stability policy outlook, considering that the lack of democracy in the Middle East is a major security issue for the U.S.

Carothers and Ottaway explicate the preceding in the “Uncharted Journey: Promoting Democracy in the Middle East.” They argue that “the new democracy imperative for the Middle East, at least on the part of Western policy makers, is thus driven not by a trend toward reform in the region, but by the West’s own security concerns” (Carothers and Ottaway, 2005, pp. 4).

In order to press on Arab governments to instigate political reforms, the U.S. used diplomatic carrots and sticks efforts. Despite that this controversial policy has been growing stronger; its progress has been advancing slowly. This is observed as the result of the fact that the U.S. is still persisting to prioritize other security and economic related interests and, most of all, guaranteeing its access to oil. Even though democracy promotion may seem to be the principal policy of the U.S., it “has a lengthy laundry list of other priorities in the region: access to oil, cooperation and assistance on counterterrorism, fostering peace between Israel



and its neighbors, stemming the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and preventing Islamist radicals from seizing power” (Carothers and Ottaway, 2004).

As a consequence of ensuring these interests, the U.S. resumed the existing close ties with some authoritarian regimes, halted remarkable political change, and as a result this contributed to strengthen the hand of tyrants on power. Moreover, the U.S. persisted on “valuing autocratic stability for the sake of various economic and security interests” (Carothers, 2003). Additionally, it has been designated that democracy promotion in the Middle East is not the principal interest among the contradictory interests of the U.S., but only one of them (Carothers and Ottaway, 2005).

There is also “the problem of credibility” of the U.S. as a prodemocratic actor in the Middle East. The U.S. policies of “democracy promotion is for many in the region either a dark conspiracy or meaningless rhetoric” (Carothers and Ottaway, 2005, pp. 253). That is because people in the region experienced how the U.S. undertook an uncompromising pressure of carrot and sticks policies for some autocratic regimes, as Syria, while ignoring to press on other friendly tyrants, as Saudi Arabia.

There is as well some inconsistency between Western and Arab debates, which complicates the process. Even though the Bush administration launched new initiatives such as the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative and the Middle East Partnership Initiative, “they consist of mild, gradual measures designed to promote democratic change without unduly challenging the authority of incumbent governments” (Carothers and Ottaway, 2004). Thus, the region remains politically closed where “governments are still unwilling to take serious measures to head off the very worrisome longer-term signs of trouble” (Carothers and Ottaway, 2005, pp. 7).

## **Background of the Political System in Syria and Saudi Arabia**

Democratization is as much about the society as it is about the state. Accordingly, states and societies need to be in constant interaction with each other, since democracy is a power struggle between the center and resisting periphery, namely the state and society. Within these boundaries not only strategic individuals, who belong to elites, impact the society, but also the society—the periphery—has its impact on decisions and actions of ruling elite (Migdal et al. 1994). These interactions are nonexistent in Syria and Saudi Arabia; therefore it is important to illustrate the existing political systems there while considering state reformation and democratization processes.

Another basic component of state and society interactions for democracy is the aspect that states should not be the only central actors in societies and should never be almost autonomous from social forces (Migdal et al. 1994). However, this is also not the case considering the situations of the Syrian Arab Republic and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Nowadays, it is the authoritarian leaders who rule most Arab countries in the Middle East. Some regimes have created secular republics dominated by one ruling party and the military; as Syria, while other ruling monarchies have based their legitimacy on the Qur'an and the Shari'a; as Saudi Arabia.

Even though the name of the country—Syrian Arab Republic—defines it a republic, it, in reality, is an authoritarian regime. The president is nominated by the single ruling party—the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party—and is approved by a referendum for a seven-year term. The president is the Secretary General of the Ba'ath Party and leader of the National Progressive Front. The Party bestows extensive powers upon the president, along with a leadership character within the state and society. The military has the executive power in its hand with the purpose of delivering the top leaders of the state. It is remarkable as well that the long-ruling Al-Asad family is Alawi Muslims, whereas the majority of the

population, 74 percent is Sunni Muslim while Alawis comprise only 12 percent of the population (Syria, Wikipedia the free encyclopedia).

On the other hand the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy where the monarchy is the central institution of Saudi Arabian Government. The basic law declares that the Qur'an and Shari'a are the constitutions of the country, which are the basis of Islamic law. There are no political parties or national elections. The leading members of the Royal family choose the King from among themselves and the King must retain a consensus of the Saudi Royal family and religious leaders—otherwise called “ulema”. The Council of Ministers—consisted of a prime minister, the first and second deputy prime ministers, 20 ministers, two ministers of state and a small number of advisers and heads of major autonomous organizations—are all appointed by and responsible to the King and the King acts as the highest court of appeal. The 13 provinces are led by princes or close relatives of the Royal family where all governors are appointed by the King (Saudi Arabia, Wikipedia the free encyclopedia).

As it is apparent, both countries' political systems demonstrate that there are neither interactions between the state and society nor impact on decisions and actions of ruling elite. As a result, in the first case there are no opposition groups, including diverse political parties to be able to function openly and participate freely in the political process. Even if there are political parties they are not permitted to activate and are not official. The problem is that it has the form of a centralized power comprised of the ruling single party which is the only party permitted to activate on one hand, and on the other, the military which is directed by the principles of the same party. Then in the second case, the country is totally governed by the Monarchy and the King has all the power under his control.

Accordingly, both countries' situation is the outcome of an authoritarian and aggregate state which does not generate mutual transformations between the society and state, hence making the state autonomous from the social forces.

### **Methodology**

The objective of this paper is to analyze the U.S. policies for promoting democracy in the Middle East that have been designated as a national security priority. It will examine how the U.S. democracy promotion efforts are implemented on the ground of two Arab countries: Saudi Arabia and Syria and will raise the following questions:

- What is the condition of human rights and freedom in Saudi Arabia and Syria?
- What are the objectives of the U.S. policy to promote democracy in the Middle East?
- How does the U.S. exercise pressure on Arab governments, specifically Saudi Arabia and Syria, to open their political systems and respect human rights?
- What are the successes and failures?

For the purpose of analyzing the aforementioned research questions content analysis of a number of documents were done.

U.S. documents, fact sheets and releases of the White House and the Department of State were examined. Namely, the National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2006, 9/11 Five Years Later: Successes and Challenges, the Middle East Partnership Initiative, speeches and statements by the U.S. president George W. Bush. These documents have been analyzed to reveal the framework of U.S. policies, objectives and strategies implemented with regard to democracy promotion in the Middle East.

In addition, U.S. annual country reports have been observed in regards with the achievements of the U.S. initiatives and to illustrate the situation of democracy, human rights and freedom in Saudi Arabia and Syria. Explicitly, Supporting Human Rights and

Democracy: The U.S. Record 2005-2006 and Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2005-2006 have been analyzed.

Research has also included two organizations' annual reports regarding the state of human rights, freedom and democracy in Syria and Saudi Arabia. Specifically, the Human Rights Watch reviews and reports about human rights' practices in 2005 and 2006, as well as the Freedom House Country Reports in 2005 and 2006 were observed.

## Analysis

### *Status of Democracy and Human Rights*

#### *Syria*

The abovementioned political structure of Syria evidently elucidates the statement of the Freedom House Country Report in 2005 and 2006, respectively, that “the Syrian people cannot change their government or exert influence over policy making through democratic means,” and the “citizens of Syria cannot change their government democratically.”

When the Syrian president Bashar Al-Asad came to power, he pledged to root out government corruption, allow the civil society to discuss the country's political problems openly, and he also established the first private newspaper. This notwithstanding, the intellectuals opposing the autocratic rule were detained for peacefully expressing their views. The government has set strict boundaries on the freedom of expression, association, and assembly, while the ethnic Kurd minority has been considered second-class citizens (Freedom House Country Report, Syria, 2005).

In the 2005 and 2006 Country Reports of the Freedom House, Syria has been acknowledged, for the fourth year in a row, as a country where political rights and civil liberties have been violated fully: “Freedom of expression is heavily restricted...the government has considerable discretion in punishing those who express views or publish

information that ‘opposes the goals of the revolution’ or tarnishes the image of the state...the broadcast media is state-owned...freedom of assembly is largely nonexistent...freedom of association is restricted.”

Allegedly, Syrian citizens, with prior permission from the Interior Ministry, can hold demonstrations, but in practice only the government and the Ba’ath Party are permitted to hold them. A few unregistered human rights’ groups are allowed to function in Syria; however their principle actors have been detained for human rights’ related activities. For example in May 2005, head of the Arab Organization for Human Rights-Syria was detained for nearly six months on charges of “disseminating false information” about the government (Freedom House Country Report, Syria, 2005).

The Human Rights Watch World Report of 2005 also indicates human rights activists’ harassment and imprisonment, limitations of freedom of expression, association, and assembly, stating that “Syria’s human rights situation is poor, and showed little or no improvement” (Human Rights Watch World Report, Syria, 2005).

Despite the government release of some 500 political prisoners and acquitted charges of some human rights defenders as part of its “overall reforms”, the authorities continue to pursue and arrest other human rights defenders and non-violent critics of government policies.<sup>1</sup> The government and the security forces have detained individuals who are supposedly announcing false information, carrying out non-violent criticism of government policies and assumed to be in association with Islamist groups and the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>2</sup> (Human Rights Watch World Report, Syria, 2005).

Syrian officials implied that broad reforms would be undertaken in the electoral system with respect to legalizing political parties and propagating the freedom of the media,

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<sup>1</sup> There are estimates that about four thousand political prisoners remain in detention in Syria and the authorities refuse to divulge information regarding the exact number or names of people in detention on political or security-related charges.

<sup>2</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood in an unofficial opposition party, for which the Law #49 since 1980, states that affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood is punishable by death.

etc. but “no substantial measures were undertaken to implement the recommendations” (Freedom House Country Report, Syria, 2006).

Thus, the Freedom House Country Report of 2006 acknowledged Syria for the fourth year in a row having a status of a “not free” country, and on a scale of one to seven—where one represents the best of performance of political rights and civil liberties and seven, the worst—it was both on the seventh score.

The Supporting Human Rights and Democracy: The U.S. Record 2005-2006 as well concludes that “in 2005, Syria’s human rights record remained poor.” It also recognizes the government’s imprisonment of activists and critics who tried to express anti-governmental views by peaceful means. As a result, the “government prevented any organized political opposition.”

### ***Saudi Arabia***

Saudi Arabia’s political system evidently exhibits the Human Rights Watch statement that the public is “dependent on the good will of members of the Royal family”. (Human Rights Watch World Report, Saudi Arabia, 2005). The Freedom House Country Report statements about Saudi Arabia in 2005 indicate also that “citizens of Saudi Arabia cannot change their government democratically.” Most government structures do not have any control over the legislative branch of power, while the decision-making process and the judicial branch lack independence from the Monarchy. There are no political parties, and the government has a strict control over the media. The official religion of Saudi Arabia is Islam and there is no freedom of practicing any religion other than Islam. There is also no freedom of association and assembly, and activists have been arrested for taking part in demonstrations that demanded political change and have been charged with “stirring up sedition and disobeying the Ruler” (Freedom House Country Report, Saudi Arabia, 2005).

The same proclamations are stated by the Human Rights Watch of 2005 that “Saudi law does not protect many basic rights” and the strict limits on freedom of expression; the arbitrary detentions, torture and executions,<sup>3</sup> as well as the lack of official accountability “remain serious concerns.”

Women continue to suffer from severe discrimination and harsh impediments to their participation in all sectors of the society. They were not permitted to vote or be nominated as candidates in the latest commenced municipal elections and continue to be excluded from jobs that are considered “not suitable to their nature.” Abuses of foreign and migrant workers continue, who are confronted with “exploitative working conditions” (Human Rights Watch World Report, Saudi Arabia, 2005).

Even though a governmental human rights commission was established in late 2005, in order to coordinate Saudi government practices with human rights standards, the government continues to abuse independent Saudi Arabian human rights defenders. Detainment of human rights defenders and repression of their efforts to establish independent rights monitoring groups continue (Human Rights Watch World Report, Saudi Arabia, 2005).

In spite of international and domestic pressure to implement reforms, progress has been indeterminate and insufficient. The Human Rights Watch (2005) concluded that “human rights violations are pervasive in Saudi Arabia and overall human rights conditions in the kingdom remain poor.”

The Freedom House Country Report of 2006 recognizes Saudi Arabia as “not free”. Even though the statements of Freedom House reports about the situation of democracy and freedom in Syria and Saudi Arabia are similar, nonetheless it indicates a “slight improvement” of civil liberties of Saudi Arabia from the seventh—the worst performance—to the sixth score “due to the growing impact of regional media on press freedom.”

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<sup>3</sup> The Kingdom carried out seventy-three executions by late September 2005, more than the twice number of executions in the 2004 which was thirty-two.



This progress has been taken place as the result of the transformation of the media that affected Saudi Arabia in 2006, which was due to the somewhat unrestricted delivery of satellite television and the Internet. The Supporting Human Rights and Democracy: The U.S. Record 2005-2006, also remarks that freedom of the press improved relatively, as there has been some criticism of the government in commentaries and discussions, which have been suppressed issues previously. Thus, these have been observed as improvements which slightly expanded the civil society's freedom of expression. But, in addition, the document determined that "despite these important steps forward, the government's human rights record remained poor", because some commentators were detained and abuses of prisoners continued.

The increased discussions over political reforms—which took place against the background of the transition of power from King Fahd to King Abdullah—rendered some government officials to express viewpoints about the need for political change and reform. As a result, partial electoral changes were made. Municipal council elections were held, which was the first such elections since 1963, and this offered the civil society an opportunity to vote at the local level. Nonetheless, the electoral laws and regulations contained limitations for participation such as: "male citizens who are at least 21 years old; who are not serving in the military; and have resided in a particular electoral district for at least 12 months" were allowed to vote. (Freedom House Country Report, Saudi Arabia, 2005). Other electoral limitations that the Human Rights Watch points out are the restrictions that prohibited candidates from combining in electoral lists, and controlled the two-week campaigns of the published materials and meetings in private homes. (Human Rights Watch World Report, Saudi Arabia, 2005)

Nonetheless, in respect of the fact that all seats were previously appointed by the monarchy, this improvement was considered a progress, since half of the seats were elected

while the other half were appointed by the monarchy. This change was designated as an indication that affected in the score change of the civil liberties of Saudi Arabia.

In the light of this change, the National Security Strategy of the U.S. 2006 deemed Saudi Arabia as a successful state, since the reports of the National Security Strategy of 2002, and stated that Saudi Arabia “has taken some preliminary steps to give its citizens more of a voice in their government” (National Security Strategy of the U.S., 2006, pp. 2).

In addition, even though the Supporting Human Rights and Democracy: The U.S. Record 2005-2006 has categorized Saudi Arabia as one of the “countries of particular concern for continued severe violations”, yet, the elections of municipal councils have been highly greeted by the U.S. here as well, as “steps to widen political participation”. However, they were pronounced to be “very limited” referring to the facts that Saudi women did not vote and that half of the council members were appointed by the King.

#### ***Policies and Initiatives of the U.S. with Respect to Democracy Promotion***

The U.S. commitment to the policy of democracy promotion and exportation of democratic principles to the Middle East is the outcome of a belief, in a broader U.S. imperative, to promote democratic values and establish more freedom in the world. Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, this dedication for reforms and democracy promotion aimed at the Middle East has been a high-profile matter for the U.S., and the latter has provided additional resources and remarkable new initiatives toward its implementation, the best example being the Middle East Partnership Initiative which will be discussed later.

In his “State of the Union Address” (2006) last year, the U.S. president George W. Bush asserted the same views expressed more than two years ago, according to which the U.S. supports the Arab states in the building of democracy. He stated that democracy is the road to peace, because those governments that respect the rights of their nation likewise respect those of their neighbors.

This policy is most apparent in the National Security Strategy of the United States of both 2002 and 2006, yet in 2006 these objectives have been more assertive. The pursuit of democracy promotion in the Middle East is viewed as an immediate national security policy, since the current tyrants there jeopardize and threaten the U.S. interests. “Ending tyranny” in the world has been conveyed as the first objective for “the way ahead” of the National Security Strategy, where Syria has been mentioned as one of the countries that needs to be primarily dealt with (National Security Strategy of the U.S., 2006, pp. 3).

Another U.S. document “9/11 Five Years Later: Successes and Challenges” (2006), states as well that the Middle East democracy promotion is an important concern where changes are essential. Its objectives articulated that the U.S. “must employ all elements of U.S. national power, including public diplomacy, development, and democracy-building programs” (pp. 21) to support freedom and democracy in the Arab world.

The U.S. recognized a number of successes as a result of its policies in the Middle East. “9/11 Five Years later: Successes and Challenges” (2006) represents the following successes as “significant strides that made America and its allies more secure” in correspondence with its democracy promotion policies in the Middle East:

- Before 9/11, the U.S. has prioritized stability without pressing too much on the inconsistencies of undemocratic processes and violations of human rights and freedom in the Arab world. However, after 9/11 it has been clear that “stability was not the outcome”. On contrary, undemocratic processes and the lack of freedom escalated in the region, consequently anger and resentment grew. Now, five years later “democracy and freedom are an integral part of the U.S. agenda.” This agenda has been carried out in such initiatives as the G-8’s alliance with the Broader Middle East and North Africa in the Partnership for Progress and a Common Future.

- Before 9/11 democratic institutions and processes were largely fragile or even absent throughout the Middle East. Today, freely multiparty elections are having the tendency to be acknowledged as the foundation for a legitimate government as well as they are comparatively increasing more and embracing new challenges (9/11 Five Years Later: Successes and Challenges, 2006, pp. 2)

As an indication of the improvements accomplished through bilateral and multilateral efforts of the U.S. to promote democracy, the document cites the Freedom House's statement, that "the Freedom in the World 2006 ratings for the Middle East represent the region's best performance in the history of the survey" and that this positive trend has been increasing since 9/11. (9/11 Five Years Later: Successes and Challenges, 2006, pp. 6).

On the other hand in spite of these successes, the document presents the current challenges that the U.S. needs to deal with stating that even though "elections are a visible sign of a free society, but they alone are not enough to advance democracy." One of the most important challenges underpinned concerning the Middle East democratization process is Syria's action of continuously support, harbor and sponsor terrorists both at home and abroad and its relations with Iran related with the purchase of Weapons of Mass Destruction. The document presents the preceding as existing impediments on the way of democracy promotion in the Middle East, which needs further assessment stating that "effective democracies are the long-term antidote to the ideology of terrorism" (9/11 Five Years Later: Successes and Challenges, 2006, pp. 5).

To fulfill this end, the U.S. employs strategies and efforts directed at supporting the rule of law, promoting democratic governance and facilitating economic development relying on the fact that effective democracies promote and protect the institutions of civil society, maintain sovereignty and the rule of law; reveal and resolve disputes and conflicts peacefully and protect independent public opinion. These efforts included:

- The Middle East Partnership Initiative MEPI for supporting reformers in the Middle East.
- The Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) with the G-8 launched in 2004 the “Partnership for Progress and a Common Future” intended for the support of political, economic, and social reform.
- Broadened USAID operations in the Middle East designed with new programs emphasizing trade, education, health, and democracy. (9/11 Five Years Later: Successes and Challenges, 2006, pp. 5)

The BMENA represents cooperation between the U.S. and the G-8, together with regional partners in the Middle East. It initiated the Forum for the Future for the advancement of freedom, prosperity, and opportunity for all. It supports the deliberation of innovative reforms in the region coming from civil society groups, lead supportive countries and governmental leaders. Foreign, finance, and educational ministerial officials are brought together for discussions in the sphere of the BMENA initiative and the Forum. In the focus of the BMENA, trainings were offered to Saudi school principals and Education Ministry officials by the U.S. joint efforts with the U.S.-based Center for Civic Education. The training delivered skills and concepts for teaching civic education, including activities to promote community involvement and grassroots democracy (Forum for the Future, webpage).

**Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)**

Supporting the reformers in the Middle East, the Bush administration launched the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) in 2002. Since then, the MEPI allocated billions of dollars in order to assist these reformers. And in so doing, it set these four pillars:

- Political: targeting of the spread of democracy by strengthening the democratic practices, the role of free and independent media, and promoting the rule of law;

- Economic: growth of competitiveness, and the strengthening of micro enterprises and SMEs;
- Educational: improvement of the standards of education by expanding the accessibility of education;
- Women's Empowerment: increase of the women's participation in the political representation toward building democracy and fighting for women's rights (Goals, MEPI, webpage).

Together with assisting the society to advance its freedom, the MEPI also functions as a “transformational diplomacy using both diplomatic power and foreign assistance” (Middle East Partnership Initiative, webpage).

The cases of Saudi Arabia and Syria were included in the field of interest of the MEPI 2006 programs, but, in the extent of exposure, each case had incomparable circumstances. Saudi Arabia was covered extensively much more than Syria.

The MEPI programs, which aimed at the reform initiatives of Saudi Arabia (2006), covered all of the four aforementioned pillars. The Political pillar reforms of this country have focused on three elements: civil society and reform advocacy; the rule of law; and media support. Strengthening the civil society and supporting the reformers, the following programs were put into practice: Enhancing the Role of Arab Women in the Legislative Process; Strengthening the Democracy Assistance Dialogue; and Civil Society Strengthening.

These programs address questions such as how to best protect transparency and accountability, and how to approach political reform. The Middle East Legal Development Initiative program has been adopted in order to promote the rule of law. It placed two programs with the intention of developing free, independent, and accurate media. The Middle East North Africa Development Initiative Alliance; the MENA Media, and the Media Sustainability Index (MSI) programs were set to support a sustainable independent media by

enhancing the rights of the latter and journalists, supporting the plurality of news sources, assisting to the emerging independent media and offering innovative training opportunities. (Saudi Arabia, MEPI, 2006).

These programs are directed toward the promotion of democracy in Saudi Arabia; carry the objective of engaging the civil society in all sectors, and “bringing non-government organizations, governments, and citizens together to push the boundaries of change” (Saudi Arabia, MEPI, 2006).

In spite of this, it is noteworthy that the MEPI programs—which aim at investment, entrepreneurship, and improving trade and transparency in the Economic pillar of Saudi Arabia—comprise sixteen programs, which is more than the twice the number of the Political pillar’s. This indicates that the U.S. economic initiatives—behind the tag of democracy promotion—for Saudi Arabia have always dominated the political initiatives and allocated more investments with this country.

The MEPI programs intended for providing assistance to the reforms in Syria, on the other hand, were directed solely at the Educational and the Women’s Empowerment pillars.

The Educational pillar has set two programs for the support of educational reforms in Syria and these are the Student Leaders’ Study of the United States Institutes, and the G-8 BMENA Global Learning Portal. These programs are designed to enable more students to obtain the necessary skills to be able to participate in the political transformation of today’s world. With respect to the Women’s Empowerment pillar, the MEPI programs are directed at issues such as women and the law through the Arab Women’s Legal Network program, women’s rights through the Survey of Women’s Freedoms program, and women’s economic empowerment through the Business Internship Program for the Young Women of the Middle East. The goals of these programs are to abolish the discriminatory and arbitrary legal systems against women, to establish practical skills for women so as to influence the

legislative processes that address women's rights, to support the local reformers of women's rights, to increase and offer economic independence for women, and to enlarge the influence of women in the private sector (Saudi Arabia, MEPI, 2006).

Thus, MEPI initiatives of Syrian reform programs are less than half the programs initiated for Saudi Arabia's reform. This unequal distribution can be realized as an impediment that may resulted the unremarkable progress in Syria on one hand, and on the other, Syria's rejection of U.S. democracy initiative policies.

### **Methods of Pressure by the U.S.**

The U.S. employs a variety of diplomatic tools, policy instruments and most of all carrots and sticks policies to promote democracy in the Middle East. Bilateral diplomacy of U.S. officials toward engaging Arab governments on the reform issues, and public statements made by U.S. officials visiting the region are the most common ways for U.S. policy makers to keep democracy promotion a visible issue in the American dealings with the Middle East.

### ***Syria***

The National Security Strategy of the United States for the year 2006 has set a number of methods for ending tyranny and promoting democracy. These include "applying sanctions that are designed to target those who rule oppressive regimes while sparing the people" (National Security Strategy of the U.S. 2006, pp. 6). This method has already been utilized in 2004 when the U.S. president had signed an "Executive Order" on imposing economic sanctions on Syria. Determining the actions of the Syrian government, he declared a state of national emergency in order to deal with that threat.

This order of economic sanctions came six months after the U.S. president had signed into law, on December 12, 2003, The Syria Accountability Act and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act, which presented outlooks on the imposing of a series of sanctions against Syria should the latter not end its unwillingness to make reforms, continue the human rights



abuses, the support of Palestinian terrorist groups, the military and security interference in Lebanon, the pursuit of Weapons of Mass Destruction, and not carry out its commitments under UN Security Council resolutions concerning the stability in, and rebuilding of Iraq. In May 2004, the U.S. President concluded that Syria had not met these conditions and, consequently, the “Sanctions on Syria: Executive Order Blocking Property of Certain Persons and Prohibiting the Export of Certain Goods to Syria” (2004) was released. These sanctions included:

- Prohibition on the exportation or reexportation to Syria of any item listed on the U.S. Munitions List<sup>4</sup> or Commerce Control List<sup>5</sup>;
- Prohibition of the exportation or reexportation to Syria of any object of the U.S. except for food and medicine;
- Prohibition on aircraft of any air carrier owned or controlled by the Syrian government to take off from or land in the U.S., other than for the transportation of Syrian government officials and those related with a state of emergency;
- To freeze assets, interests, property or property in interest of those belonging to certain Syrian individuals and government entities from being transferred, paid, exported or withdrawn;
- Prohibition of making of any donation as well as the receipt of funds, goods, or services by, to, or for the benefit of any person whose assets, mentioned above, are blocked.

After signing the Executive Order, the U.S. president urged the Syrian government to contribute itself to political and economic reforms, just like other nations. He made a statement of the implementation saying: “the Syrian government must understand that its

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<sup>4</sup> The United States Munitions List included items such as arms and defense weapons, ammunition, etc.

<sup>5</sup> The Commerce Control List included dual-use items such as chemicals, nuclear technology, propulsion equipment, lasers, etc.

conduct alone will determine the duration of the sanctions, and the extent to which additional sanctions may be imposed should the Syrian government fail to adopt a more constructive approach” (Sanctions on Syria: President’s Statement on Implementation, 2004). He also pointed out that the U.S. would respond positively if the Syrian government manifested an authentic intention toward real peace.

Another pressure by the U.S. was the decision by the Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to recall in February 2005—in the wake of the Hariri assassination—the U.S. ambassador to Syria (U.S. Recalls Ambassador to Syria, 2005).

These policy trends in the direction of severing diplomatic ties with Arab states and exercising sanctions against them have been verified and reaffirmed as continuously enduring strategies. This was referred to once again few months earlier, which identified that the U.S. “will continue to implement sanctions against, and promote international isolation of states, until changes are made” (9/11 Five Years Later: Successes and Challenges, 2006, pp. 14).

This reliance on economic sanctions and severance of diplomatic relationship came to serve as a pretext intended for insisting the Syrian political system to be opened for political and democratic reform. Nevertheless, these efforts failed to achieve the desired result and change, because they virtually halted all negotiations and downgraded the involvement in democracy reform, aid programs and initiatives to be implemented.

### ***Saudi Arabia***

Even though a range of issues has sometimes complicated the U.S.-Saudi relations, they remain unchallenged. Oil and national security concerns have always combined to produce a close and cooperative relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. Despite the problematic issues of democratic reform of Saudi Arabia, the U.S. has never exerted pressure on Saudi Arabia. It only “urged Saudi Arabia to widen political participation and to extend

greater protections for religious minorities and women” (Supporting Human Rights and Democracy: The U.S. Record 2005-2006).

Attempting to address the aforementioned concerns, U.S. policies in Saudi Arabia were directed only on devoting frequent visits of U.S. high-level officials to Saudi Arabia in order to keep up a correspondence with the government senior officials on reform issues related with political participation, transparency and accountability in government, religious freedom, and rights for women and workers (Supporting Human Rights and Democracy: The U.S. Record 2005-2006).

The U.S. president Bush and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia initiated the Strategic Dialogue in their meeting in April 2005. Subsequently, in November 2005, U.S. Secretary Rice and Saudi Arabia Foreign Minister Saud have launched it in Jeddah and meetings have been arranged every six months since then. The U.S. Record of 2005-2006 mentions that “The Dialogue’s Education, Exchange, and Human Development Working Group were established to address improving citizen participation in decision-making and human rights issues and promoting tolerance.” However, during the last meeting in May 2006 issues of concern, including respect of religion and political reforms, were referred to as regional matters. They have been discussed for other Arab countries’ democratic reform with no mention of Saudi Arabia’s democratic reform process (U.S.-Saudi Strategic Dialogue, 2006).

Attempting to observe the situation and the practice of the “Majlis”, U.S. officials participated in these weekly gatherings, where in theory any male citizen or foreign national may express an opinion or a grievance (Supporting Human Rights and Democracy: The U.S. Record 2005-2006). Even though this limitation was identified no pressure was exerted and no recommendations of change were suggested.

Failing to take significant steps to address issues of trafficking and workers’ rights the U.S. categorized Saudi Arabia of being on Tier 3. Accordingly, the only relative pressure that

has been exerted was the U.S. initiation to impose sanctions on Saudi Arabia. However, suddenly the Secretary of State decided to waive sanctions on Saudi Arabia “in the interest of national security” of the U.S. (Supporting Human Rights and Democracy: The U.S. Record 2005-2006).

This U.S. reluctance to push political reform and exerting pressure on friendly tyrants as Saudi Arabia helped to develop a perception that the U.S. demanded reform from and exerted pressure on only its enemies and countries where it had no benefits; as Syria, while strengthening relations and compromisingly welcoming other countries; as Saudi Arabia.

### **Conclusion**

There is an extensive recognition that few Arab regimes truly grasp the importance of the challenges that they face and the changes that are required to face them. More common is the uneasiness of significant shifting of political power out of their hands would jeopardize their continued rule. At the same time, the increasingly public and productive discussions concerning reform in the region are indications about the deliberation of independent viewpoints about the need for reform. Moreover, it suggests that discussion concerning the need for reform and its nature is no longer something that Arab leaders can avoid entirely.

Complete success is never possible in the short run. The road to democratic reforms in the Middle East entails a long, difficult, and a constant change. There are, nonetheless, a variety of practical and effective ways to help build democracy and democratic institutions. They can be bilateral and multilateral; by means of trainings, exchanges and other programs which need to be focused on:

1. Strengthening civil society

Assistance can be provided in a cooperative manner to the government, opposition groups and civil society in countries where the civil society is comparatively freer. Political

parties and parliamentarians can be rendered to success stories and models, while non-governmental organizations, which are the vanguard of the democratic middle, need to have trainings on advocacy method. The designed programs should be targeted onto reinforcing constructive citizen demand for change in support of countries that have undertaken partial reforms and countries that have closed political system. More programs must be included intended for trainings of young people trying to break the monopoly on political power, and the inclusion of country activists in regional alliances.

## 2. Changes in electoral system

Elections and political leadership changes can provide an opportunity to promote competition on political power. Democracy promotion efforts should be aimed at increasing the competitiveness of elections. This can be realized through political party training programs, international and domestic election monitoring efforts and through coalition building advices to parties and political leaders. As well as focus groups can be used to help democrats understand the demands of voters.

## 3. Support and protection of journalists

There are few regional Arab voices who speak out against human rights' violations or other abuses of freedom of speech. The development and funding of a network intended for the training of professional standards for journalists need to be more actively encouraged on one hand, and on the other securing them from probable detentions.

## 4. Public opinion surveys

There are, as well, few scientific public opinion surveys in the Arab world. Local academic organizations should be trained in modern focus group and survey research methods and the results of opinion researches should be broadly released. Scientifically gathered public opinion information can help to counterbalance the claims of authoritarian

rulers, who are still the only uttered voices on behalf of their populations. Public attitudes and opinions should be of public recognition.

There are, in addition, challenges associated in correspondence with the often contradicting economic and security interests of the U.S. To this end, there is a need for the U.S. foreign policy to examine more consistently the fact that it sometimes stands for promoting democracy and other times supports relations with non-democratic governments.

With these concerns in mind, the U.S. can readjust its approach toward the Middle East. The following are some major implications that need to be undertaken in the process of rebuilding the strategy to promote democracy in the Arab world:

- To effectively promote democracy in the Middle East, the U.S. needs to concentrate on the formulation and implementation of state-by-state policy strategies which are customized to the specific situations in the different countries of the region. One way can be an assessment of countries' situation, which can be categorized to three assessed groupings: countries where democracy is most likely to take hold and can be considered as emerging democracies for the reason that they have both governmental commitment to reform and significant citizen demand, others which have initiated limited political reform but are governed in subtle authoritarian systems with limited political freedom and finally countries that have closed political systems resistant to outside assistance as Saudi Arabia and Syria.
- In doing so, when programs are initiated, it should go in to the public in order to include in the initiated programs as many individuals as possible.
- The U.S. needs to make additional efforts to promote bilateral negotiations with all Arab countries to impel democratic reforms without severing diplomatic ties with some governments, while strengthening relations with others. Then again, it should be

emphasized that employing force for change is neither practical nor effective; on the contrary, it brings about more crises and trouble.

- Few of the abovementioned suggestions for democracy promotion will have much impact if they are not backed by forceful and consistent diplomacy. In order to moderate Arab perceptions of inconsistency and hypocrisy, there is a necessity to re-establish new U.S. democracy strategies that authentically pioneer the democracy promotion initiatives equally as top on the list of priorities equally for all Arab countries. If the policy is going to have an effective sustaining underpinning and is to result in a newfound regional priority for democracy and human rights, then that policy must be perceived to be consistent and fair and must apply equally to oil rich and strategically important countries, as well as to the weak, unfriendly and even the hostile ones.

Even though there are some perceptions that the current situation of political affairs in the Middle East is the result of religious or cultural bias against democracy, nonetheless it is the combined consequence of the resistance of authoritarian rulers on one hand and religious extremism on the other. That is why democracy cannot take root in the Middle East without significant changes within the societal structure. Hence, the urgency and necessity of attention to the democracy building process in the Middle East ought to be realized parallel with stressing on the internal reforms in support of the civil society, so as to help societies build their own democracies in the long run. To realize this end, the most crucial issue is to employ an inclusive strategy to encourage and assist indigenous democrats and democratic movements throughout the Middle East. This strategy would be directed primarily at encountering, pinpointing and protecting the rights of democrats, who are being abused and detained by their governments. It should also highlight a realistic timeframe for the

development of deep-rooted democracy, because the pace of progress will vary and in many cases it may need decades of reform.

On the other hand, recognizing that external pressure upon internal political change is always a difficult proposition, the U.S., given the anti-American sentiments that the Arab world has, faces a greater difficulty in the case of the Middle East democracy promotion. This issue can be observed as a major obstacle to this end and requires further inclusive inspection and clarification.

The War on Terror, for instance, is seen as a long-term approach for the advancement of freedom and human dignity by way of promoting democracy in the Middle East. The word “war” itself can formulate a tendency of hostility, which leads to the rejection of the policies originating from the U.S. As long as the aggression toward the U.S. exists, the latter’s policies for democracy promotion in the Middle East will not be perceived positively and, subsequently, no implementation might be undertaken.

Full cooperation between the U.S. and the Middle East can be expected in the case when the U.S. democracy promotion is viewed by the Middle East as not deliberately hostile. Although many Arab governments and reformers tend to reject the U.S. as the courier of reforms and democratization, the message itself still has a wide public resonance in the Middle East.



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