

DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
AND THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

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A CENTURY FOUNDATION REPORT

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This paper is part of The Century Foundation's Project on Democracy and U.S. Foreign Policy. The project—encompassing a book, a paper series, and public seminars—explores whether and in what manner the United States should continue to support individuals and groups working to establish democracy in non-democratic countries, and support governments as well as individuals and groups in countries that are on the path to democracy. Under the direction of Morton H. Halperin, the project and the book that issues from it will consider the case for including efforts to foster democracy around the world as a key component of U.S. foreign policy—both on America's own and multilaterally, in conjunction with allies, such as the European Union and its member states, as well as key democratic countries in the global south.

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INTRODUCTION

As President Barack Obama enters office in 2009, his administration confronts a daunting set of challenges in the Middle East, including bringing an end to the Iraq war, addressing multiple unresolved tracks of the Arab-Israeli conflict, developing an effective response to Iran's nuclear program and regional ambitions, neutralizing continued threats posed by terrorist groups, confronting Islamist political extremism, and dealing with internal conflicts in several key countries. At the same time, rising security threats in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India may divert U.S. attention and resources from the Middle East to South Asia.

This complicated mix of issues understandably could tempt President Obama to repudiate the Bush administration's entire approach to the Middle East and the world, including its controversial so-called freedom agenda aimed at spreading democracy in the region. Disillusionment with the meager results of the Bush freedom agenda, the negative reactions to it in the region, and the destabilizing impact it has had on the Middle East might prompt the Obama administration to shift away from discredited efforts to promote democracy. The temptation to embrace counsels to foreign policy realism and a *realpolitik* balance of power strategy that would focus more on ensuring stability and less on governments' democratic performance and human rights practices may be strong. But abandoning attempts to advance democracy, freedom, and decent governance in the Middle East would be a mistake for the United States. It also would represent a retrenchment from the progressive values and vision for national and international security articulated by candidate Obama during the 2008 presidential election campaign. This paper analyzes recent trends in the region, attempts to draw conclusions from the

results of U.S. policy, and offers core priorities for a new U.S. approach to Middle East democracy promotion.

THE MIDDLE EAST TODAY

The notion that the United States must choose between achieving stability or promoting democracy and freedom in the Middle East is a false one, and the new administration has an opportunity effectively to move beyond it in ways that its predecessor did not. The Obama administration can adopt a more pragmatic approach for democratic reform that acknowledges the full scope of challenges in the region without abandoning democratic principles and the enduring impulses within the region for change and reform. The first step is to take stock of the lessons learned from the Bush administration's approach to the Middle East, including its attempts to promote a freedom agenda. In 2009, the United States must begin a frank assessment of the democratic reform challenges that lie ahead for the Middle East—one that not only acknowledges the shortcomings in the Bush administration's strategy, but also takes into account complicated regional dynamics and the long-term nature of those challenges. In reviving democracy promotion in the Middle East, the Obama administration should seek to launch a pragmatic reform effort that discards the label and main approaches of the Bush freedom agenda and sets a new strategy grounded in the context of Arab publics' own well-documented aspirations for democracy and human rights.

Today, Middle Eastern countries have a variety of governing systems, including traditional monarchies, autocratic republics, and semi-authoritarian states that allow for some degree of political pluralism. The realist school of thought in international relations has largely maintained that outside actors should remain indifferent to the types of regimes in places such as the Middle East and should instead focus on stability. Some of those voices have reemerged more forcefully in recent

months, and their arguments have some merit in the wake of the Bush administration's Middle East failures.¹ The liberal internationalist school of thought has placed democracy and human rights promotion at the center of its argument for how the United States should organize its overall national security strategy.² Under the Bush administration, neoconservatives promoted over-militarized means to achieve stated democratic ends, with dismal results for democracy in the region.³

As a result, the Arab Middle East remains one of the most difficult regions of the world for advancing democracy. According to Freedom House, a majority of the countries in the region remain "Not Free." As of 2008, Freedom House categorized six countries and territories as "Partly Free" along with a total of eleven "Not Free" countries. From 2000 to 2008, there were slight improvements in the overall situation in the region, with the number of "Partly Free" countries increasing from three to six.⁴ Several countries in the region experienced some promising advances in increased civic activism and a growing diversity of media outlets.⁵ But overall, the democracy outlook for the region is currently pessimistic, particularly when measured against the objectives laid out by President Bush for freedom and democracy promotion throughout his term in office.

At the start of 2009, political and economic elites in most countries in the Middle East maintain a tight and largely unchecked grip on power, in some cases with the support of internal security agencies that quell legitimate political dissent. Governments in the Middle East have adapted to democratic reform efforts pressed on them by the United States, often moving adroitly to stabilize authoritarian rule in models that have been classified as "liberalizing autocracy"—a system of rule that allows for a measure of political openness and competition in the electoral, party, and press arenas, but ultimately ensures that the power remains in the hands of those already ruling these regimes.⁶

The policy approaches developed by many governments in the region have amounted to what one analyst calls "upgrading authoritarianism,"

with measures that include co-opting and containing civil society, managing elections to preserve the existing power structures, introducing selective economic reforms, and controlling new communications technologies.⁷ Even though the Middle East has experienced a historic transformation of its media landscape with the advent of regional satellite television, increasing access to the Internet, and the growth of other new media, several authoritarian governments have taken steps to crack down on these independent news and information outlets. Furthermore, the lack of equal rights and opportunities for women and religious minorities remains a problem in several Middle Eastern countries.

Some analysts argue that the sharp increase in energy prices in 2008 has only strengthened the hand of ruling elites in oil-rich countries and made real openings for democratic reforms less likely, and that the price of oil and the advance of democracy and freedom have an inverse relationship for countries that are endowed with significant oil and gas reserves.⁸ The gyrations in the price of oil—hitting record levels in the spring of 2008 and then declining precipitously as the global recession took hold through the summer and fall—may introduce some uncertainty inside the political systems of oil producing countries in the Middle East during the opening months of the Obama administration. In sum, democracy advocates in the Middle East face a very steep uphill battle at the start of 2009 and the Obama administration.

PRIORITIES FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

As President Obama enters office, the opportunities for advancing democracy in the Middle East appear much more limited than when his predecessor entered office. Accordingly, the United States should adopt a fundamentally different approach in order to reverse the negative trends in the region—one

that thinks outside of the typical toolbox of democracy promotion and moves beyond traditional approaches to democratic reform. This approach will require a democracy promotion strategy that is linked to an overall rethinking of the U.S. national security approach to the Middle East—tinkering with minor changes in various democratic assistance packages is not likely to have much of an impact. Given the major constraints that exist on U.S. national security policy in general, even attempts at significant shifts in policy may have limited effects. Nevertheless, to advance U.S. national security interests in the Middle East, democracy promotion should remain a key objective, and the new administration should set the following six priorities for the Middle East.

PRIORITY 1: TAKE TANGIBLE STEPS TO RESTORE U.S. CREDIBILITY

President Obama will have a brief window of opportunity to rehabilitate the U.S. image and carve out for America an approach to democracy promotion that is distinct from that of the Bush administration. How Obama talks about democracy promotion will be an important part of that new approach. President Bush's one consistent theme in his national security strategy was that the expansion of freedom and democracy would defeat the forces of terrorism and extremism. This elevated rhetoric featured prominently in nearly every major foreign policy pronouncement in his second term. It also created unrealistic expectations in the Middle East and around the world about how quickly sustainable political reforms could be implemented and resulted in great disillusionment when those expectations were not met. In addition, by tying reform efforts to the "war on terror," the Bush administration sent a message that the democracy and freedom agenda was first and foremost self-interested and aimed at transforming societies for America's benefit. This impression—combined with the Iraq war, the handling of detainees in Iraq and elsewhere, an overemphasis on military means, and the possibilities for further regime changes in "outposts of tyranny"⁹—sent a message that

was counterproductive to actually achieving the stated goals of the Bush administration.

In the first year of the new administration, the United States, working in tandem with other states, international organizations, and civil society leaders in the region, should change the way it discusses these reform efforts, presenting them as cooperative, pragmatic efforts aimed at advancing development and promoting internationally recognized norms rather than as a self-interested crusade. This means developing reform efforts in close cooperation with key stakeholders in the Middle East, lowering the temperature (and expectations) in America's rhetoric, and disentangling the linkage between advancing democracy promotion and addressing the threats posed by global terrorist groups. The Obama administration should unequivocally call for continued support for democracy, but the presentation of the rationale should be reframed to a hopeful vision that connects with the desire of the people in the Middle East to achieve tangible progress in their lives and acknowledges the resonance of the cultural and religious values that shape societies in the Middle East. Doing this effectively will require an active listening campaign on the part of the United States, one that demonstrates Washington's genuine commitment to understanding how publics in the Middle East views the United States.

Actions speak louder than words. In addition to changing how it talks about democracy and freedom, the United States must take tangible steps to regain its credibility in a process that one analyst calls "decontamination" from the negative practices associated with the Bush administration's approach.¹⁰ To reshape perceptions in the Middle East, the United States—including not only the Obama administration, but also members of Congress and representatives of the justice system—should find a solution to the policy question of thousands of detainees and prisoners under U.S. military control in Iraq; it should also continue its work in closing the Guantanamo detention camp and secret prison facilities run by the CIA, as well as abandon the practice of remanding terror suspects to countries with poor human rights records.

The detention of tens of thousands of individuals, many of whom are from the Middle East, outside a transparent international framework for the rule of law reduces American credibility on democratic reform and opens it up to charges of hypocrisy, with critics of U.S. policy pointing out human rights and rule of law abuses justified in the name of fighting the war on terror. As a matter of values and principles, the United States should work with other countries to develop a sustainable and viable justice system that deals with these detainees.

More broadly, the United States should take steps to restore habeas corpus and bring wiretap surveillance efforts back into the framework of the rule of law in the United States. Sending the signal that the United States is cleaning up its act on these fronts is a necessary step for reviving U.S. credibility on democracy promotion in the Middle East. Without some progress on these measures, anything else that the new administration tries to do on democracy promotion—whether it is political party building or civil society support, or any of the other traditional programs in the U.S. toolbox—will likely yield few results because of the substantial credibility gap. The new administration needs to send a clear message that the United States intends to practice what it preaches by adhering to the legal obligations it assumed in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention against Torture, and other human rights treaties. Strengthening the legal framework for rule of law will require not only action on the part of the Obama administration but also engagement by leaders in the U.S. Congress. How the United States reintroduces itself to the world—keeping its national security policy in line with the highest human rights standards—will set the framework for how U.S. actions on the democracy promotion front are perceived throughout the Middle East.

In addition to taking these steps to restore America's image and credibility in the region, the new administration should look to enhance existing partnerships and build new ones. Given views about the United States in the Middle East, rather than go it alone, Washington should seek to develop joint efforts

with other countries working to advance democracy in the Middle East, such as members of the European Union and Japan, and with multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations Development Program and the World Bank. The United States is not the only outside actor working to advance decent governance and democracy in the Middle East, and developing more strongly coordinated approaches to advancing democracy in the region will be necessary to meet the daunting challenges. Limited partnerships and coordination already exist on some fronts, particularly between some U.S. and European nongovernmental organizations, but expanding these collaborative efforts will help reframe perceptions of U.S. efforts to advance democracy in the Middle East.

PRIORITY 2: INCREASE DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS TO PROMOTE NATIONAL CONSENSUS IN KEY COUNTRIES AND ADDRESS CONFLICTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The second strategic priority for the new administration is initiating a series of diplomatic efforts to address key conflicts in the Middle East—both cross-border conflicts and internal conflicts. The Middle East has several conflicts that require greater attention, including the unresolved decades-old Arab-Israeli conflict and internal frictions in Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, and Yemen. Continued security threats posed by non-state actors, as well as ethnic and sectarian tensions all shape the environment and make it less conducive to democratic development.

The set of conflicts that is most directly relevant to the goal of reviving democracy promotion efforts in the Middle East is internal divisions in countries. Several countries of the Middle East—including Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories—lack a strong consensus over sharing power between leading factions. In some cases, such as Iraq, the tensions among competing factions remain quite strong,¹¹ and in other countries, such as Lebanon, the internal divides lurk beneath the surface and threaten to upset a tenuous balance. Oftentimes these divisions over power-sharing are directly linked to

constitutionalism and the principles set out in basic laws organizing checks and balances and separation of powers within a system. U.S. cooperation with key actors such as the United Nations and support for mediation efforts of third-party countries and actors (as in the spring 2008 efforts by Arab countries to address internal divisions among the Palestinians and Lebanese) could be helpful for building a more solid foundation for advancing democratic governance in the region.

For example, in the case of Iraq, ongoing disputes among the top factions over key questions related to power-sharing remain the central stumbling block for developing a solid foundation for democratic governance at national, provincial, and local levels. These disputes have not prevented democracy promotion efforts from continuing, with implementers providing important training, support, and advice for Iraqi civil society groups and political parties. But the absence of a national consensus and compact on the central issues of how to define the nature of the Iraqi state and how to share power has remained a major impediment to advancing Iraq's political transition. Many of these disputes over power-sharing and establishing the core constitutional principles are tied to underlying conflicts over power and resources. Helping set up the parameters for a deliberative discussion—one that engages broader populations—will necessarily take time. But instead of another mad rush to the next series of elections in Iraq—such as the one in 2005, when most Iraqis voted in a referendum on a constitution that they had not had a chance to read, let alone have much of a voice in developing—the United States could work with partners such as the United Nations and other actors to help societies suffering from sharp internal gaps bridge their divides.

This second priority is a strategic necessity given the relative inattention and sporadic engagement of the Bush administration on several key fronts—Israeli-Palestinian, Israeli-Syrian, and Israeli-Lebanese tracks as well as the broader Arab-Israeli conflict. It is also vital for addressing some

core issues that have hampered democracy development efforts, with some governments in the region using the unresolved Arab-Israeli conflict as an excuse to delay internal reform processes. The new administration may be inclined to breathe life into the Bush administration's moribund efforts begun at Annapolis in November 2007 to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or it may prefer another negotiating format—but either way, it needs to move quickly. It will likewise be helpful if there is some momentum on various other fronts like the Israeli-Syrian track. In some cases, direct U.S. involvement in peace-making efforts may be limited, but Obama needs to be seen as playing a supportive role to interlocutors such as Turkey or Egypt that are playing important mediation roles.

The Arab Peace Initiative, first introduced by Saudi Arabia in 2002 and endorsed again at the Riyadh Summit in 2007, is a comprehensive proposal for ending the Arab-Israeli conflict based on the land-for-peace formula embodied in the relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions. The Obama administration should look for similar ways to revive regional diplomacy to advance comprehensive proposals to end the conflict.

For all of the peace tracks in the Middle East, the manner in which the parties implement a peace deal could be an important means for advancing democratic discourse in the Arab world. Previous peace deals, including the Egyptian-Israeli and Israeli-Jordanian agreements and the interim agreements between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), were implemented by Arab authorities without much public deliberation over the merits of those deals. This is in marked contrast with the democratic debates among the Israeli public and its representatives in the Knesset over all peace agreements. Although building in additional mechanisms for public debate over peace accords may seem at first glance unrealistic, in the short-term only serving to complicate the efforts to achieve a peace agreement in an already difficult context, even limited measures to allow peaceful democratic debate on future Arab-Israeli peace accords could help serve to build a more solid and

sustainable foundation for those deals. This does not necessarily mean that a possible Arab-Israeli peace deal should be subject to a popular referendum in Arab countries—that may not be practical, given the substantial challenges in the coming years. But including the notion of having a broader public discourse over proposed peace deals could help advance security in the region while fostering a more peaceful democratic debate in the Arab world. In the long run, engaging the public in peace initiatives will ensure that any agreement is more durable.

PRIORITY 3: DEVELOP INTEGRATED U.S. APPROACHES TO SUPPORTING DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNANCE REFORM IN THE MIDDLE EAST

A third strategic priority for U.S. democracy promotion is developing a more coherent, coordinated, and streamlined approach for implementing policies offering support for democracy and governance reform. Inside the U.S. government, this will mean a substantial reorganization of the structures delivering assistance to countries in the Middle East and the introduction of new processes that ensure a more integrated interagency approach, greater consistency, and coordination of efforts.

Proposals for dealing with structural inefficiencies, overlaps, and the lack of coordination between different agencies and the various program implementers should be examined carefully. Some have proposed creating a new cabinet-level Department for International Development to replace the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID),¹² an idea that has some merit. Policies implemented by a diverse range of actors, including the State Department, USAID, the Pentagon, and the intelligence community, must be coordinated more thoroughly to encourage better practices by governments in the region. Several experienced democracy promotion practitioners and thinkers on democracy have offered cogent proposals for bringing greater coherence to the multiple U.S. efforts. One proposal would have the State Department get out of the business of funding, increase resources for independent endowments such as the

National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and assign USAID programs with a particular development dimension.¹³ The State Department could play a role where its focus is on directly engaging state actors, quietly encouraging reform in a way that strengthens bilateral relationships.

In addition to executive branch agencies, private sector groups, and nongovernmental organizations, the United States should increase its efforts to boost ties between Congress and legislative institutions around the world. Members of the U.S. Congress often engage with the executive branches of other governments, and having more members of Congress develop ties with their counterparts in Arab legislatures is another avenue for pragmatically supporting reform that emphasizes more checks and balances in political systems in the Arab world. The bipartisan House Democracy Assistance Commission (HDAC), organized by Representatives David Dreier (R-CA) and David Price (D-NC), has worked to develop the institutional capacities of legislatures in several countries around the world, including Lebanon.¹⁴ Diversifying the U.S. democracy promotion toolbox to include efforts such as those of the HDAC, which include advice and support on all aspects of legislative management and governance, sends the right message to governments about the importance the United States places on democratic governances.

One aspect of U.S. democracy promotion that consistently does not get sufficient attention is the cooperative efforts the United States has with other governments in the military and intelligence fields. Too often, the discussions ignore the important role the U.S. military and intelligence services play in shaping the practices, behaviors, and calculations of governments around the world. This is particularly true in the Middle East, where the U.S. military has been playing an increasingly important role in shaping how governments enforce the rule of law, police their communities, and deal with security threats. In recent years, the United States has begun to make substantial investments in security sector reform and support in a range of Middle Eastern countries—Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories. It also has had long-standing programs

of security sector support in Egypt and several Gulf countries. In northern Africa, the U.S. military has a Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership that is largely focused on military, intelligence, and security services.

The new administration should place a higher priority on developing security assistance programs and cooperative relationships with intelligence agencies that promote better human rights practices and encourage civilian democratic oversight of military and security services in some fashion. Large sums of U.S. taxpayer money are dedicated to supporting the military and intelligence agencies of countries in the Middle East. By working to connect these systems to the broader executive, judicial, and legislative authorities that can provide oversight and accountability, the United States could create initiatives that help build a stronger fabric of better governance and anti-corruption through governing. Security sector reform is not just an essential cornerstone of stability, it can also be a platform to promote better practices within governing systems—including fair and balanced oversight from democratic legislative branches and better working relationships with judicial authorities. Achieving progress in this area will require building the right set of incentives to advance reform in implementing the rule of law, and it will also mean developing a more integrated approach that avoids the “stove piping”—agencies not coordinating efforts—that all too often exists in multifaceted bilateral assistance programs.

When U.S. intelligence and military professionals work with their counterparts in the Middle East to address security threats, they can quietly encourage greater professionalism focused on maintaining rule of law rather than underwriting political repression. This in itself could be another way to quietly push forward reforms in certain countries in the Middle East. But taking this approach will require getting outside of the USAID/NED/State Department corridor and fostering a comprehensive interagency approach that acknowledges the important work being done by the Pentagon and U.S. intelligence services in helping societies build the foundation for rule of law. The work

done by General James Jones, President Obama's national security advisor, in helping facilitate efforts to build security forces in key areas such as the Palestinian territories can be a key component of a broader strategy to advance governance and rule of law. But to be most effective, these efforts should be better integrated in broader programs to promote good governance, effective elected civilian oversight over the security services, and accountability.

Having a comprehensive interagency approach also will necessitate a National Security Council with empowered directors who make this approach a priority in inclusive policy coordinating committees; the challenges in enhancing greater coordination between such a diverse set of actors are considerable, but the potential benefits for promoting democratic reform in the Middle East are great.

PRIORITY 4: INCREASE POSITIVE INCENTIVES FOR DEMOCRATIC REFORM EFFORTS

The fourth priority for the new administration in advancing democracy in the Middle East is developing ways that the United States can increase the number of positive incentives that encourage countries, particularly those lacking oil and gas wealth, to promote the rule of law and suppress corruption. The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), which was aimed at promoting economic growth while putting a greater emphasis on democracy, human rights, anti-corruption, and better governance, is a model that the new administration should look to develop and integrate with other policy tools. The incentives should be significant enough to shape the calculations and decisions of governments in the region. The MCC should increase its minimum standards on democracy for providing assistance and not narrowly focus on governance or suppression of corruption. The assessment of whether a regime is "ruling justly"—including indicators on civil liberties, political rights, public voice and accountability, government effectiveness, rule of law, and control of corruption—should become the central criterion for evaluating the eligibility of countries for assistance.

A second positive incentive that the United States should seek to develop in the Middle East is offering the potential benefits of joining multilateral institutions and international clubs that offer prestige and connections to members of reform-minded governments. The Bush administration did not sufficiently utilize the Community of Democracies initiative established in 2000, and the new administration should examine ways that this intergovernmental group can play a positive role in encouraging democratic reform in the Middle East.

PRIORITY 5: BUILD A DIVERSITY OF FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The new administration should increase its efforts to encourage public-private partnerships and private endowment and private sector support for advancing democratic reforms in the Middle East. Private donors have supported think tanks, international exchange programs, and education initiatives, but few of these donors have explicitly offered support for democratic reform efforts.

U.S. democracy advocates also might look to the Middle East and encourage the emergence of an “Arab George Soros”—someone with the financial capacity and interest in supporting democratic reform in the Middle East. A report by the John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy and Civic Engagement at the American University in Cairo indicated that institutionalized philanthropy is rapidly growing in the Middle East.¹⁵ These foundations have shied away from efforts that are directly linked to democratic political reform, but many of them have educational components including providing scholarships for youth to study in the United States. The United States should look for creative ways to work with these foundations to encourage them to advance a broader reform agenda in the Middle East. Widening the scope of investors by reaching out to the private sector in the United States and in the Middle East can help advance reform in the region by getting broader and more tangible buy-in that goes beyond a heavy reliance on U.S. taxpayer support.

PRIORITY 6: RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF ISLAMIST FORCES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

An important reality that the United States must acknowledge is that many secular opposition forces in the Middle East currently hold out little hope for gaining meaningful broad-based support in several countries in the region. Islamist parties and forces have become better organized and garnered stronger popular support in key countries such as Turkey, Egypt, Morocco, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories. In Washington, some have seen secular civil society organizations and political parties as the only trusted allies for advancing a democratic reform agenda. The central question posed by skeptics of the participation of Islamist movements is whether these movements truly respect democratic values, rather than simply seeing elections as a one-time means to obtain power. Some skeptics have argued that Islamism and democracy are fundamentally incompatible,¹⁶ that Islamism represents an ideological challenge akin to that of communism during the Cold War, and that the United States should adopt a policy of isolation toward Islamist political parties and movements.

This argument is fundamentally at odds with the realities in the region. The broad-based resonance of Islamism among the public in many countries, combined with the popular support for democracy among the constituencies of many of these Islamist movements, makes the case for the incompatibility argument weak in practice. The United States has developed partners in Iraq with many leading political parties that are based on Islamist principles, including the Dawa party, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, and the Iraqi Islamic party.

The U.S. government should maintain its policy of not working with Islamist groups currently on its foreign terrorist organization list. It must continue to make a distinction between those groups that have explicitly renounced violence and groups that have not. For those that have not renounced violence, it should press regional allies and other interlocutors to encourage

those movements that espouse violence as a means for bringing about political change to update their views to reflect universal principles of respecting human rights and supporting nonviolent means.

CONCLUSION

The Obama administration enters office facing considerable constraints at home and abroad. The global recession and weakening economy at home will likely consume much of the new president's time and attention, while continued security challenges in Afghanistan and Pakistan will likely divert resources and attention away from the Middle East. The complicated and combustible mix of problems in the Middle East and the interlinked challenges of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iran, and Iraq could lead the Obama administration to adopt a conventional national security strategy aimed simply at increased instability throughout the region, with less attention and focus on human rights, freedom, and democracy. Moving in this direction would be a mistake for the United States.

The so-called freedom agenda of the Bush administration was a failure of both conceptualization and implementation—an overly militarized approach to promoting democratic reform and an effort that failed to match the lofty rhetoric of President Bush with actions on the ground that reflected democratic values. As a result, the region has not become more democratic because of U.S. actions than it was in the previous decade. Even in Iraq, where the U.S. military ousted a brutal dictator from power, the current ruling authorities have demonstrated a weak respect for human rights and the rule of law. The challenges for Middle East democracy remain considerable. But shifting away from democracy promotion would be a mistake for long-term U.S. strategic interests in stability and prosperity in the region.

The United States, under the Obama administration, should redouble its efforts to advance political reform in this difficult region of the world, with

more emphasis on pragmatic steps to enhance better governance and the rule of law, and less of the lofty rhetoric that makes democracy promotion seem like a crusade. Making this shift in strategy will require significant changes in how the United States implements its national security policies—a more coordinated interagency effort is necessary, and stronger collaboration with other global powers and democracies to promote stability and reform in the Middle East is a crucial element, too. But the most important step that the United States and the full range of U.S. institutions and organizations can do to advance human rights and democracy in the Middle East is to practice what it preaches—lead by example and ensure that its actions match the democratic values and ideals it seeks to advance in the Middle East.

NOTES

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