



 COMMENTARY WORLD

The Seven Pillars of the Arab Future: Introduction

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This post is excerpted from “The Seven Pillars of the Arab Future.” The full version is available at Democracy, and is reprinted here with permission.

The early days of the Arab uprisings were uncomplicated and inspiring, as they reaffirmed many Westerners’ long-held beliefs regarding universal values, human rights, and democratization. With the fall of long-standing dictators and the spread of unrest and protest, historical parallels were quickly drawn to the transformative events of 1989, which witnessed the fall of the Communist dictatorships of Eastern Europe and the acceleration of events that soon thereafter led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

But as violence assumed a more prominent role in Libya, Syria, and elsewhere, the straightforward and attractive image of organic protest against authoritarian rule became muddied. The uprisings and their consequences—the murders in Libya of U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three others, the democratic enfranchisement of illiberal factions, the Mali unrest, the ongoing crises in Egypt—have forced Western liberals to grapple with their fears regarding both regional instability and Islamists and their attempts to insert religion more prominently into governance and the public square.

So what does the future hold? As we watch these riveting, often exhilarating, and sometimes horrifying events, the bottom-line questions in all our minds are simple. Can democracy take root in the Arab world? How long will it take? Ten years, 20...50? We all hope for a great transformation, in which Egypt, Syria, Yemen, and their neighbors embrace democracy and pluralism and cast off autocracy and extremism. But is there reason to be optimistic?

While we cannot make specific predictions, we can say broadly that the ultimate success of the Arab uprisings will depend heavily on the development of seven core areas.

1. Economic growth and equality
2. Education policy
3. Security-sector reform
4. Transitional justice
5. Decentralization

5. The development of regional norms on democratization
7. The flourishing of a more pluralistic politics, which in many ways is the linchpin for the other six pillars

These are the seven pillars of the Arab Future. They are the yardsticks by which we can measure progress in the region in the coming years.

The United States has not played a central role in this story. Nor should it be expected to. Change must be initiated organically and in accordance with the perceived interests of local actors. The United States, along with the international community, cannot dictate change, but it can guide and encourage it. Despite debates about American decline and diminishing leverage, the United States remains the most potent outside actor in the region and will, with its allies, have a role to play in supporting regional change.

In the coming days, I will have posts examining each of the seven pillars. I will then explore some lessons for U.S. policy in light of these seven pillars.