

Democracy Promotion in Arab Politics

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The first part of this essay explores features and factors pertaining to democratic ideas, ideals and procedures in general and the limits of their applicability in the Arab world in particular. The second part assesses the persistence of the U.S. credibility problem in the Arab world, which became more evident after the George W. Bush Administration began advancing its democracy promotion plans for the "Greater Middle East" region. Although it remained largely symbolic, the Administration's focus on democratization has, directly or indirectly, played a contributory role in strengthening the status of autocratic Arab regimes that support U.S. policy and interests, while hindering the stability of regimes that remain opposed to the U.S. and its allies in the region. In general, the article aims at examining factors and events that have contributed to the deleterious effects of U.S. policy on democratization in the Arab world. More specifically, it argues that the Bush Administration's rhetoric on democracy promotion, which strengthened the status of pro-U.S. regimes in the Arab world, has also contributed to empowering Islamists' popular appeal along with hampering the U.S.'s credibility, public image and prestige across the region.

Key Words: *Democracy Promotion; U.S. Credibility Problem and Autocratic Arab Regimes*

1. INTRODUCTION

A majority of Arab incumbent elites, supported by the U.S., have, for decades, utilized their traditional sources of power and charisma as a means to manipulate their subjects and preserve the political stability of their societies. While depending on strong military institutions, Arab incumbents have also utilized their established rules and procedures as a means to exploit public fear, co-opt moderate opponents and repress dissidents in their respective countries. In response to growing local and international pressures for democratic reform, notably in the post-September 11th era, a number of Arab regimes, influenced by the Bush Administration, began conducting minor political and economic changes, which in the end did little to modernize their entrenched autocratic politics. Although some encouraging liberalizing changes have been introduced, mainly in non-Arab countries in the Islamic world, incumbent Arab regimes remained, for the most part, neither interested nor able to consolidate thriving political and economic reforms that would commit them to the ideals and procedures of democracy, including, among others, the acceptance of the rule of law, political inclusion, along with accountability and transparency in governance. Unlike most Arab incumbent elites, however, the Arab and Muslim masses across the region have regularly expressed interest in genuine and comprehensive reforms that would empower and entice them to play a part in the conduct of public policies of their societies. (Balqzeez 2000: 135-153).

Although U.S. policymakers have traditionally expressed little or no interest in democratizing Middle Eastern states in general and Arab countries in particular, the Bush Administration began, in November 2003, pursuing steps for promoting democracy in what it called the "Greater Middle East," which includes additional Islamic countries such as

Afghanistan and Pakistan. Apart from the Administration's real intent that may lay behind its democratization efforts, the worsening of the security situation in Iraq, the increased popular appeal of Islamists across the region and the rising criticism of the U.S. approach to the Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts have eventually enticed Bush's advisors to abandon the democracy promotion agenda in favor of shoring up the status of Arab autocratic regimes that continue to serve the goals and interests of the U.S. in the region. (Gershkoff and Kushner 2005: 525-536). Undoubtedly, the Bush Administration's unprecedented degree of identification with Israel's interests at the expense of others in the region has further limited the ability of the U.S. to positively influence or transform rising anti-American sentiment in the Arab streets. Ironically, while backing the autocratic Arab regimes at the official level, the Administration continued to provide the same lip service support for its plans to democratize Iraq and the larger region. Given this situation and despite criticisms from its foes and allies, the Administration has supported the parliamentary elections held in Iraq, Egypt and the Palestinian territories. At the same time, however, Bush's advisers did not expect that such support would in the end empower Hamas in Palestine, the Muslim Brothers in Egypt and the Shi'a factions in Iraq.

The persistence of authoritarian politics in the Arab world has been mainly attributed to economic, social and political factors that are largely shaped by the type of policies and form of governance practiced by Arab autocratic leaders and institutions. Apart from these internal causes, other factors, mainly external, including past European colonial legacies in the Arab world and the U.S.'s current intervention in the region, may have also, to a large degree, contributed to the strength of authoritarian politics and widespread corruption in the Arab world (Labeeb 2000: 199-231). For example, the Palestinian Authority's (PA) incompetence to govern or deliver services to its citizens, which has largely been caused by the continuation of Israel's military occupation of the Palestinian territories, has contributed to the spread of corruption associated with the PA leadership and institutions. Furthermore, the deteriorating security and political situations in Iraq, which is attributed to the failure of the U.S.'s mission in the country and the continuation of its military intervention, has also contributed to the reviving of deeply rooted sectarian feuds among and between Iraqis. In other settings in the larger Islamic world, however, instead of pursuing democratization, the Bush Administration found it far more convenient to eagerly cooperate with and support autocratic regimes, such as in the case of its backing for Perviz Musharaf's regime in Pakistan. Across the Arab world, the Bush Administration's democratization efforts have been mainly inhibited by the rising appeal of puritan Islamists, along with the rise of a new generation of Islamist extremists, groups that ultimately benefited from the U.S. invasion of Iraq (Gerges 2005).

While recognizing widespread differences regarding the precise circumstances that may exist in each setting in the Arab world and understanding the different causes that may have hindered democracy promotion in these settings, a combination of internal and external factors appear to have been largely responsible for the persistence of authoritarianism in the region. Domestic factors such as political, economic and social challenges across the Arab world have played the most significant role in hindering democracy promotion efforts. Having supported and protected the status of its Arab autocratic allies in the region, the U.S. also, directly or indirectly, contributed to the persistence of authoritarian politics in the region. Over the course of their history, pro-U.S. autocratic regimes in the Arab world have managed, often in the name of challenging Islamist extremists or, more recently, in the name of the war on terror, to strengthen and maintain their unchallenged dominance in their own

countries. Although the continued strength of authoritarian politics across the Arab world and the failure of the Palestinian-Israeli peace efforts have existed long before the Bush Administration came into office, Bush's failure to play a decisive and positive role in Iraq and/or with regard to his democratization efforts have essentially undermined the U.S.'s credibility and prestige. Although the reasons for the Administration's failure to accomplish its plans for the region are diverse, the heavy reliance of most U.S. policymakers on established frames of references and misperceptions about the region and its people may have produced misguided recommendations for the Arab world.

Consequently, any real efforts intended by U.S. policymakers to overcome the present challenges facing their policies across the region, with respect to, among others, the Iraq situation, the Palestine issue, the war on terror and democracy promotion, should begin, first and foremost, with intense reviews and questioning of the approaches, policy recommendations and conducts of U.S. policymakers towards the Arab regimes and Israel on the one hand and the Arab and Muslim public on the other. Without re-examining the U.S.'s cultural orientations and policy choices that have always sided with Israel at all costs, the deep mistrust that the Arab and Muslim masses hold toward the U.S. and the West will likely continue to exist and therefore, hinder the successful pursuit of the U.S.'s goals in the region. Given the heightening of its present credibility problem, the U.S.'s ability to influence the Arab public or to democratize the region will continue to fail. Whether or not the lack of a solution for the Palestine issue and the deterioration of Iraq's security status, which have not contributed to a stable setting conducive to democratization, should be viewed as crucial in explaining the strength of anti-Americanism and the persistence of Arab autocracies, remains to be seen. Undoubtedly though, Arab regimes have over the years managed to play a complicit role in undermining democracy in their societies. (Abdallah 2000: 311-324).

2. INCUMBENT REGIMES AND DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

In reference to the "Third Wave" of democratization that took place in Southern Europe, Latin America and Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, Richard Hass viewed attempted reforms in various Arab and non-Arab countries in the Islamic world as signs of a "fourth wave" of democracy promotion (Hass 2003: 138). As mentioned earlier, although the recent elections that took place in Iraq, Egypt and the PA have all led to the success of Islamists, who might be hesitant to support ideological and political diversities in their societies, the election events themselves have been cited as signs supporting democratization in the region. Although successes were made in these elections at the procedural level, the application of essential democratic ideals and values has, however, been non-existent in the larger Arab world. While exploring different experiences with democratization worldwide, Professors Diamond, Linz, and Lipset have singled out three factors as vital for the success of democracy promotion in most, if not all, developing countries, including the Arab world:

"(1) Meaningful and extensive competition among individuals and organized groups...for all effective positions of government power, at regular intervals and excluding the use of force. (2) A highly inclusive level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies, at least through regular and fair election...(3) A level of civil and political liberties...to ensure the integrity of political competition and participation." (Diamond, Linz and Lipset 1988: p.xvi; Schlumberger 2002: 107)

These features reveal, among other things, the depth of difficulties surrounding democracy building efforts in Arab politics, where existing incumbent regimes' main concern remains centered on preserving their governing status over society (Hijab 1992: 69-85). Past European colonial legacies, along with the more recent U.S. interventions in the region, have also hindered the success of democratization efforts in the Arab world. The U.S.'s backing of autocratic Arab regimes and the deepening of its involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan has further added to the existing challenges facing its efforts to reforms in the region. Although initially treated as welcome news, the deposing of Saddam Hussein was eventually viewed as having failed to bring the Iraqis and surrounding countries any closer to democracy. As a skillful tyrant and aware of the details of his authoritarian legacy, Saddam stated in 2003 that while the U.S. "may get rid of me as president ... [it] will need seven presidents to hold this country [Iraq] down." (Halliday 2005: 219). While pointing to detrimental threats stemming from outside interventions and to domestic limits on transforming Iraq, Saddam's view reveals the extent to which Arab institutions remain subjected to a one-man's legacy in governance. Similar to Iraq, the surrounding countries, notably Syria, the strength and continued legacy of al-Assad's dynastic regime, have, often in the name of challenging the U.S. and Israel, placed the Syrians under the strict and unquestionable control of the regime.

Whether self-motivated or externally imposed, democratization in most settings, including the Arab world, entails, among other things, the creation of political institutions and procedures that are based on the rule of law, popular sovereignty, political inclusion and expansive commitments to liberal ideals that should in the end be able to establish equal treatment under the law along with ensuring the presence of meaningful citizens' participation in public policies (Zeedani 1990: 4-21). Despite vast variations in human's understandings and/or applications of democracies worldwide, countries experiencing various types of democratic transitions are expected to pursue and achieve most, if not all, of the following deep-seated features, procedures and values that identify most modern democracies: (1) self-governing and popularly elected authorities based on free, fair and competitive elections; (2) protection of, and respect for, human and individual rights and liberties; (3) embracing of fairness, tolerance and hospitality towards disadvantaged groups (Marty 2005); (4) existence of independent judiciaries and presence of oversight procedures between legislative and executive powers; (5) elimination of all forms of political persecutions; (6) safeguarding of freedoms of expression, religion, press and association; (7) legal protection for political groups and parties; (8) effective de-politicization of military institutions; (9) a pursuit of peaceful resolutions to local, regional and global conflicts; and (10) citizen's ability to oust their leaders peacefully and through the use of ballot boxes (Dahl 1971; Diamond, Linz and Lipset 1988; Sartori 1995: 101-111).

Although the above rules, procedures and ideals are almost non-existent in Arab politics, efforts to democratize countries in the Arab and Islamic world have resulted in inconsistent outcomes. While most studies on Arab politics have indeed pointed to widespread deficits in democracy and freedoms, successes in democratization and market-oriented liberalization can be mainly found in non-Arab Islamic countries, notably Turkey and Indonesia (Zambelis 2005: 90). Turkey's progress in the area of economic liberalization has not been accompanied with necessary and sufficient degrees of political and social reforms due to, in part, Attaturk's established legacy along with the influential political role of the Turkish military in the governing of the country. On the other hand, in most Arab countries that have experienced certain aspects of modernization, namely in the area of economic reform, such as Egypt, Jordan, Tunis and Morocco, among others, it appears that the incumbent regimes of

these and other similar countries have continually utilized, for different reasons at different times in their histories, the subject of democratization as a general tool and tactic of "political survival and one element in a type of regime that combines guided pluralism, controlled elections, and selective repression." (Diamond 2005: 17; Brumberg 2002: 56). While exploring conflicting outcomes of reforms in many settings in the region, Fred Halliday concluded:

"In some societies, a degree of limited freedom of expression and publication has been permitted, and in others the level of incarceration, torture and forced exile has declined...But on two other fronts, the balance has been different. First, none of the four core conditions of democratic order have applied: publicly available, accurate figures for state finances, income and expenditure; institutionalized and legally protected independent political parties; the ability of the electorate to vote out those with real power; full freedom of the press and information within the legal limits set by international law. Secondly, while control by governments has continued ... the political programs and political culture of many of the opposition forces have themselves become increasingly undemocratic, dominated by programs of religious and confessional authoritarianism." (Halliday 2005: 80)

As stated before, while Turkey, Indonesia and Bangladesh have experienced marginal successes in their democracy promotion efforts (Avineri 2002: 21-25), Pakistan has managed to join the Arab world in signaling the emergence of "a reverse wave" of democracy breakdown. (Diamond 2005: 14). Perviz Musharaf, supported by the Bush Administration, is now in the process of utilizing legal procedures as a means to legitimate his power and participate in the upcoming presidential election.

The failure of democracy promotion efforts in the Arab world has been documented in the U.N. Annual Human Development reports. Although the detail of governance in the Arab world remains a taboo, such reports namely highlight the internal challenges that continue to obstruct democracy-building efforts in Arab politics. These challenges are exemplified in the continuous presence of various trends of authoritarian regimes, notably personal dictatorships, dynastic and military regimes across the Arab world; the lack of oversight, transparency and accountability in Arab political institutions; the widespread violations of human rights and individual liberties; unchecked power of all executive authorities; the dominance of military institutions and secret police over civic and political institutions in a number of settings; and a widespread discriminations against disadvantaged groups, notably women and ethnic minorities. Although these obstacles may indeed, according to the U.N. report, constitute convincing explanations of the lack of democracy in the Arab world, the U.N. reports, although accurate, have "omitted the historical and international context in which these societies have been shaped". The main external factor that should have been included in a sequence of U.N. reports is about the Arab world's continued "subjugation to the West," which, among other things, has contributed in the "creation of authoritarian states and rentier economies" across the region (Halliday 2005: 78; UN Human Development Reports 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005). As stated before, the U.S.'s backing of Arab autocratic regimes along with its continued support for Israel, have, among other things, fueled public anger and justified Arab incumbents' rejection of democracy (Richards 2005: 28-35).

While trying to evade pressure for reform, Arab incumbents have utilized nationalist, ethnic and sectarian divisions in their own societies and have engaged their masses in

domestic feuds while ensuring the continued dominance of their existing authorities. Arab incumbents were also able to overcome their inability to establish good governance by utilizing selective forms of tolerance towards certain opponents while enforcing animosity towards other groups in their societies. By diverting attention from the so-called “others” in their societies, such as the targeting of the Kurds under Saddam’s regime in Iraq or the non-Arab groups in Sudan, Arab incumbents have, in effect, preserved their own repressive regimes. To avoid potential and future threats to their power, Arab regimes have regularly formulated alliances with moderate opponents, such as in the cases of Egypt’s and Morocco’s moderate Islamists. In other occasions, however, some of these same regimes tried to exterminate Islamic Jihad, such as in the case of the Egyptian regime’s conflict with the Islamic Jihad group during much of the 1980s. While the successes of their different strategies are never certain, most Arab incumbents have thus far been able to balance their own moderate opponents against the extremist forces in their own societies. Incumbents’ ability to construct such complex “exclusive and inclusive” forms and structures of governance within their societies has provided them with the means to minimize the effects of other domestic threats and generate all needed public support for their regimes, even at times of economic crises. (Lust-Okar 2005; Mohamad 2006: 329-331). In so doing, incumbent regimes across the Arab world were able to uphold power and avert any serious pressures for democracy promotion in their societies.

The skillful ability of Arab incumbents to continue to govern at times of prolonged economic and political crises in their societies has puzzled experts and observers alike. In reflecting on the persistence of authoritarianism, a number of experts drew attention to what they considered culturally grounded factors that explain the longevity of autocratic rules in Arab politics. They, for example, cited the religion and cultures of Islam as being fundamentally incompatible with democracy promotion, especially when dealing with Islamists in the post-September 11th era. Against such culturally oriented views that became popular in recent years, however, others believe that the depiction of Arabs and Muslims as being almost naturally hostile to democratic values is not only providing misperceived and generalized information, but is also flawed and inaccurate. Claims about inherent incompatibilities between Islam and democracy have been heavily grounded in contributions made by S. Huntington and Bernard Lewis who have utilized their scholarship on the clash of civilizations thesis as a tool to explain what they saw as endless cultural wars between the West and the Muslim world (*Huntington 1993: 22-49; Lewis, 2002*). A majority of experts and observers, however, such as Richard Bulliet, John Esposito, Ali Mazrui, and Khalid Abou el-Fadl, to mention a few, presented opposing arguments that back the compatibility between Islam, democracy and the West. (Bulliet 2004). In the conclusions of normative as well as empirical research, it has also been assumed that the majority of “Muslims are as supportive of democracy as non-Muslims.” (Diamond 2005: 17).

Given the rising role of religious activism in society and the politicization of religions worldwide, including Islamists in the Arab world, (Gerges 2005), Protestant Evangelicals in the U.S. and Britain, (Anderson 2006) Jewish fanatics in Israel (Shahak and Mezvinsky 2004), and Hindu nationalists in India (Juergensmeyer 2000), the singling out of Islam as the only religion conflicting with democracy is misleading. With the exception of global Islamist extremists that advocate indiscriminate violence in what they see as an unending conflict with the U.S. and the West, (Gerges 2005), the majority of Muslims, unlike European Christians, were not hospitable to totalitarian ideologies with the magnitude of Nazism, Fascism and Stalinism. (Mazrui 1997: 118-132). Unlike puritan Islamists who are likely to

resent democracy, moderate Muslims believe that Islam has offered them procedures and values consistent with the fundamentals of modern democracy. They often point to Islamic teachings that emphasize, among other values and procedures, the need to establish a strong and interactive relationship between the Islamic *Umma* and *Dawla* (community and state). Although Muslims worldwide view their *Shari'a* (law) as being eternally valid and comprehensive, they also argue that the presence of religious procedures in the *Shari'a* such as *al-Shura* (consultation); *al-Ijtihad* (intellectual jurisprudence); *al-Tasamuh* (tolerance); and *al-Ijma'* (consensus) are valuable tools that have largely maintained the historical integrity and relevance of Islamic laws to cope with the changing circumstances influencing their societies and living conditions. (Mohamad 2000: 567-577). Islam's compatibility with democratic procedures, however, has been challenged by facts on the ground, such as those revealing that out "of the 47 Muslim majority countries in the world, only nine are democracies ... such as Indonesia, Turkey and Bangladesh." However, other Muslim communities have been thriving under democratic systems, i.e., India's one hundred million Muslims, (Diamond 2005: 16), as well as in the U.S. and Europe. The existing cultural factors cannot thus, and should not, be used as an essential factor that could on its own explain the persistence of despotism in the Arab and Islamic world. The absence of Arab democracy could be better attributed to the deeply rooted non-cultural based internal and external obstacles, such as the widespread failure and corruption along with the effects of colonialism, that have confronted the region in the past century.

3. U.S. CREDIBILITY PROBLEMS AND DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

The U.S.'s interventions in Iraq, the lack of a peaceful resolution for the Palestine issue and the U.S.'s backing of autocratic Arab regimes are among the factors that have, directly or indirectly, stalled democratization and hindered the credibility and reputation of the U.S. across the region. (Hassouna 2001: 50; Mohamad 2007: 85-94). The U.S. has been historically shielding autocratic Arab regimes in the name of enforcing regional stability. For this reason, Arab incumbent regimes have steadily argued against the promotion of democracy on the grounds that it would likely endanger the stability of their societies and allow Islamists to capture power through the use of ballot boxes. Arab autocratic regimes have also been successful in portraying liberal reformers in their countries "as agents not of positive change but of foreign occupation." (Lust-Okar 2004: 3-5).

Current U.S. Plans for reforming the greater Middle East, which came as part of a grand security strategy introduced in the post-September 11th period, were launched, along with other initiatives, including the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative, the Middle East Partnership Initiative and the Middle East Free Trade Area, with the intention of spreading democracy and liberalization throughout the region. Over the years, many Arab countries were encouraged, through financial incentives such as those often offered by the USAID, to begin pursuing democratization and free market oriented policies. After receiving financial aid, these and other similar regimes have managed to formulate varying degrees of economic liberalization, while, at the same time, have continued to resist political democratization. For example, Egypt, Jordan, Yemen and Tunisia, who have all received U.S. financial assistance, continued to impose ample restrictions on freedoms and liberties in their own societies. Their economic reforms have, in fact, served the incumbents in these countries as a means to avert pressure for political and social reforms along with distracting

surrounding “attention from the political arena” and disguise human rights violations in their settings. (Albrecht and Schlumberger 2004: 385). Despite receiving \$1.9 billion annually in U.S. aid, the Egyptian regime has also managed over the years to silence its opponents and critics with imprisonment, such as in its jailing of political activists and scholars, notably Ayman Nour who opposed President Mubarak, and Saad Eddin Ibrahim whose writings were critical of Mubarak's regime. The latest elections in Egypt, which empowered the Muslim brotherhood movement, were also utilized by Mubarak's regime to pressure the Bush Administration into halting its political democratization plans that may have benefited Islamists.

To a large degree, it is often assumed that the Bush Administration's democracy promotion plans for the larger Middle East have been influenced by idealistic traditions found in the early phases of U.S. foreign policy that are rooted, among others, in Wilsonianism and modernization theories aimed at addressing problems and challenges facing newly independent countries around the world. Although prominent political realist scholars and practitioners have openly criticized Bush's grand security strategy with regard to the Iraq war and his democratization efforts, (Mersheimer and Walt 2006: 1-32), the Administration's approach and conduct in foreign policymaking remained focused on the protection of traditional U.S. nationalist goals, i.e., to stabilize the region and secure the flow of oil to the West, through the potential use of force and/or diplomacy. The Bush Administration's idealist rhetoric on democracy promotion, following the Iraq war, has been particularly influenced by the failure of the U.S. to find the weapons of mass destruction used to legitimize the launching of the war itself, which enticed the Administration into re-inventing the reasons for its invasion of Iraq. Faced with this situation, the new strategy of the administration became thus focused, at least in rhetoric, towards democratizing Iraq and the greater Middle East.

Given existing uncertainties that may be attributed to democracy building efforts in the Middle East and the risks to political stability in the region, notably after violence in Iraq had intensified, most U.S. politicians, including some in the Bush Administration, found it more convenient to begin shifting the White House's security strategy from being centered on democracy promotion to backing the same traditional autocratic allied regimes in the Arab and Islamic world. At the same time, however, many of the neo-conservative trends in the Bush Administration continued to openly question the U.S.'s past alliances with, and support for, autocratic Arab regimes, which after the failure of the U.S.'s mission in Iraq, were subject to intellectual and public criticisms. (Mersheimer and Walt 2006: 1-32; Fuckuyama 2006) In rhetoric, however, and in response to the concerns of the neo-conservatives, the Bush Administration continued to suggest that its democratization plans for the region remained on track and that they would eventually succeed and bring about the formation of new liberalizing economies as well as legitimate and democratically elected governments with strong ties with the U.S. and the West. (Aliboni and Guazzone 2004: 82-93).

In the end, the Bush Administration's democracy promotion initiatives have resulted in mixed outcomes that have ranged from general failure, such as in the case of Iraq, to minor successes that have enticed local reforms in countries such as Jordan, Egypt, Morocco and a number of the Arab Gulf states.(Hurst 2005: 75-96). The democratization plans have contradicted the interests of incumbent elites, along with, for different reasons, the interests of grassroots reformers in the region reveals not only the depth of the U.S.'s credibility problem but also its inability to decisively influence Arab public opinions and attitudes towards its plans for the region. The limitations on the administration's ability to positively

influence the region derives, in part, from its promotion of a one-size-fits-all democratization, which may have underestimated the likely reactions from the leaders as well as the general public in the region. (Dalacoura 2005: 936).

Consequently, while attempting to promote its geopolitical and strategic agendas in the region along with pursuing, in rhetoric and perhaps as a cover-up, its idealistic principles regarding democracy promotion, the Bush Administration found itself confronted by unanticipated credibility issues that have, thus far, hindered its ability to positively influence Arab politics at the official level in general and the Arab public stage in particular. The U.S.'s credibility problem was further intensified by challenges relating to the damaging misconducts that took place during the course of the Iraq war, notably in the aftermath of the Abu Ghraib scandals. While assessing the U.S.'s pursuit of conflicting and often double-standard policies in the region, R. Aliboni and L. Guazzone stated:

“... the policies to promote democracy have an idealistic background. At the same time, they promote substantive interests ... [by which] governments happen to use the idealistic rational ... as an ideological vehicle to pursue their real and conventional interests. This interplay between idealism and realism ... affects those devoted to promoting democracy by embedding in them a tendency to practice double standards.” (R. Aliboni and L. Guazzone 2005: 87).

The depth of the credibility problem facing U.S. policy in the region, prior to and after the Bush Administration took office, has been rooted in contradictions found in calls promoting notions such as the freedom and liberty for all, which are usually identified with U.S. values and belief systems, while at the same time supporting Arab autocratic regimes and Israel's military occupation of the Palestinian territories. (Cook: 2005: 91-102) More recently, the U.S. has been blamed for, namely on Arab streets, igniting the civil war in Iraq, supporting Israel's recent invasion of Lebanon, and failing to end the stalemate in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Moderates in the Arab world also view Bush's democracy plans in the region as a factor that has deeply challenged the chances of their success in pursuing social and political reform. In addressing the U.S.'s credibility issue and its detrimental effects on democracy promotion, John Calabrese stated:

“Does the poor image and damaged credibility of the messenger fatally compromise the message? Hardly. But it does play into the hands of incumbent regimes. And it makes reformers somewhat wary of being tarred by association with the United States ... [that] suffer from a credibility deficit ...” (Calabrese 2005: 60).

On a personal level, Bush's communication style has also contributed to the credibility issue facing his Administration in the region. For example, Bush's reference to biblical concepts and generalized themes in the form of scripted speeches led not only to the construction of the image of Arabs as enemies of the U.S., but has also strengthened the appeal of anti-Americanism in the Arab world. (Merskin 2004: 157-175). Consistent with past U.S. policymakers, Bush's policy advisors have also based their agenda for the greater Middle East on “conventional wisdoms” and frame of references, which usually favor Israeli interests at the expense of others in the region. (Christion 2001). Obviously, a majority of U.S. policymakers may have consequently failed to obtain needed “true knowledge” of the deep complexities of the region that would be essential in the implementation of a possible

successful agenda in the region. (Altrman 2004: 85). Misperceptions that were often formulated by U.S. policymakers about the Arab world have not only played an essential role in the subsequent launching of misguided policy recommendations, but also in that such policy recommendation may have proven to be unsuitable, based on the issues at hand such as the democracy promotion plans, for the Arab world at both the official and public levels.

While the White House's national security strategy continues, in part, to address democracy promotion and confronting extremists worldwide, the appeal of global Islamist *Jihadies* continues to rise across the region, especially in the period that followed the Iraq war. The concept of *Jihad*, especially in western sources, is usually used to refer to a holy war while the concept of *Jihadies* describes the individuals engaged in the actual fighting of a holy war. For the most part, two trends of *Jihadies* have been thoroughly examined by experts and observers in recent years. The first trend is locally oriented and usually focuses its agenda on addressing domestic and limited nationalist objectives, such as, among others, the role played by the Islamic *Jihad* group in Egypt, the *Hizbullah* organization against Israel in South Lebanon and the Hamas movement in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The second trend of *Jihadies* is usually more radical in its tools and strategies along with being far more ideologically oriented towards confronting the U.S. and the West. This trend has succeeded in formulating what is now known as global *Jihadis*, notably *al-Qaeda*, who have succeeded in redirecting local Islamists' agendas, such as in the case of the Islamic *Jihad* movement in Egypt, more in support of global *Jihadism* voiced by the leader of that movement, Ayman al-Zawahiri, against the U.S. and the West. The strength and appeal of global *Jihadies*, that became more obvious in the post-September 11th era, has largely been fueled by the lack of a settlement for the Palestinian issue and by the damaging effects of the Iraq war. (Gerges 2005: 276). Faced with global *Jihadies* who largely benefited from U.S. involvement in Iraq, it is very unlikely that the Bush Administration's democracy promotion efforts will succeed.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Although Arab autocratic regimes remain solely responsible for the absence of democracy in the Arab world, the U.S.'s strategy on democracy promotion has failed to create the necessary changes needed to entice genuine reforms in Arab politics. The U.S. has also failed to convince the Arab masses that it supports their quest for freedom and liberty. In addition to the presence of widespread conspiracies and skepticisms about the U.S.'s intentions in the region, Arab incumbents have played a complacent role in obstructing the promotion of democratic changes, such as those initiated by the U.S., in their countries. Arab autocratic regimes have, directly or indirectly, portrayed Arab reformers and their supporters as traitors to their own nations and agents to outside powers, including Israel. (Flockhart 2005: 53-66) While rationalizing their own incompetence to pursue successful reforms, which derives from domestic challenges, Arab incumbents have been able to utilize their conflict with Israel as a cover-up to justify the absence of democracy in their societies.

At the external level, the U.S.'s inability to create positive reforms in Arab politics remains largely influenced by its unwillingness to pressure Israel to end its military occupation over the Palestinian territories. This situation has over the years heightened the credibility problem that has faced the U.S. policy in the region in general and in challenging the Bush Administration's policies in particular. (Richards 2005: 33). For their part, Israeli

politicians have, for reasons that are not significantly different from those voiced by Arab incumbents and U.S. policymakers, expressed criticisms and objections to democracy promotion plans in Arab politics on the ground that it will endanger the stability of regimes that have historically supported U.S. interests in the region. Israeli politicians such as Knesset member Natan Sharansky, who have expressed different views from most other Israeli analysts, agrees with Bush's rhetoric on democracy promotion as a means and a precondition for Israel's negotiations with the Arab world. Sharansky viewed Ariel Sharon's "disengagement" plan from Gaza as a detrimental mistake in Israel's history because, for him, the withdrawal should have been "linked to democratic reforms," both in the Palestinian territories and in the larger Arab world. Neoconservative politicians in the White House along with their Protestant evangelical supporters in the U.S. have also utilized the notion of democracy promotion in the entire Arab world as a prerequisite for any future peace negotiations between Israel and its neighbors. (Sharansky 2005: 5). Consistent with this view, former Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu is also among those who considered democratization as a factor that could serve Israel as a pretext to maintain its control over the West Bank. Apart from these general views that have linked democratization in Arab politics with political bargaining that are intended to support Israel's continued control of Palestinian land, however, the large majority of Israeli politicians believe that Bush's democracy promotion plans were and remain generally reflective of the U.S.'s naivety of the Arab world. Arab and Israeli leaders alike often cite Hamas's success in the PA's elections as a factor that should alarm them and the U.S. about the risks of democratization in the Arab world. While reflecting on the common reactions that Israeli politicians have often expressed in relation to Bush's democracy promotion plans for the Arab world, Aluf Benn stated:

"Israel's foreign policy establishment treats the idea of Arab democracy with a mixture of scorn, disbelief and fear Israelis grew to accept the current Arab governance as an unchanging force of nature ... [they] have always preferred to deal with strong men in the neighborhood, viewing them as pillars of stability, rather than taking unnecessary risks ..."
(Aluf 2005: 45)

Few scholars, politicians and observers would say that they are optimistic about the potential success of democracy promotion in Arab politics. Many realist theorists and idealist activists argue that military might have little or no substantial influence on the behavior of Arab regimes or the Arab public's pursuit of democracy promotion. This shows that the Bush Administration's democracy plans, as expressed in the aftermath of the Iraq war, have either been ineffective or superfluous. Obviously, for democratization to succeed in the Arab world, it is essential for scholars and policymakers alike to focus more on exploring the details of internal Arab politics and thus understand what seems unexplainable in the Arab world. Furthermore, in order to improve its visibly battered public image in the Arab world, the U.S. must begin changing its views on the proper approach to democratization in order to fit the specific circumstances in different parts of the Arab world. More importantly, the U.S. must try, in practice, to transform its course of actions in the region, which hardly address the interests of the Arab public. To avoid further deterioration to its credibility, the U.S. must also learn from its past mistakes, including, but not limited to, the support for the Algerian military coup of 1991 that was launched against Islamists who had won the election (Wittes 2004: 76). Similar to the Algerian situation, the Bush Administration, once again, while isolating Hamas, has managed to support al-Fatah movement as the legitimate power in the

Palestinian territories, when the facts on the ground have shown that Hamas was the winner of the elections. Failing to seriously address the Palestinians' yearning for independence from Israel's military occupation has ultimately hindered the US's geo-political and strategic goals, along with its credibility in the region. The U.S. must also realize that failing to include moderate Islamists who are willing to respect the democratic process that allows them to win elections will transform moderate Islamists into more ideologically and politically hostile trends that may threaten the U.S.'s interests along with hindering the stability of the region. As mistrust of the U.S.'s policies and motives continue to be highlighted, scholarly and policy oriented debates should try to rethink the process of democratization in the Arab world with the U.S.'s willingness to pursue a more flexible type of reform across the Arab world, rather than a one-size-fits all formula.

This article leaves open many additional factors that should be addressed in the future in relation to the subject of democracy in general and democracy promotion in Arab politics in particular. For one thing, democracy and democratic theory should be understood differently from how it is viewed in the U.S. and the West. For example, an Arab or a Muslim state may acquire certain features of democratization, that are mostly expressed in the form of guided democratization, in order to pursue a lengthy and more gradual process than the one experienced in other settings around the world. If Arab and Muslim states do indeed acquire this kind of mixed forms of democratic ideals and procedures, it should be clear that the direction of this change should be focused on maximizing public involvement in the conduct of policymaking. As such, democracy promotion in the Arab world is faced with a problem stemming, in part, from a narrow definition and understanding of democracy and democratization that largely fits understandings found in the U.S. and western views of democracy. Faced with this challenge, Arabs and Muslims continue to express real fears of western style democracy that might be viewed as a threat to their cultural orientations, religion and traditions. Of course, Arab incumbents have used the legitimate fear of their public as a means to satisfy their own strategic ends, which also entails a refusal to accept democratic values and procedures that may in due course oust them from power. The Arab and Muslim public must be convinced, in practice, that democracy promotion in their societies is not just another trick of the U.S. to manipulate their countries. The message should be clearly made to the general public that democracy is an important system for them, and those who wish to apply it will be able to influence the course of public policies in their societies and maximize their liberties, and oust their entrenched autocratic leaders who have, for too long, repressed and manipulated them.

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