



THE STRUGGLE OVER DEMOCRACY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

REGIONAL POLITICS AND EXTERNAL POLICIES

EDITED BY
NATHAN J. BROWN AND EMAD EL-DIN SHAHIN

ROUTLEDGE

The Struggle over Democracy in the Middle East

Many residents of the Middle East—and more recently, Western powers—have placed great hope in democratization in the region. Yet authoritarianism remains the norm, and movement toward democracy is both slow and uneven.

Written primarily by experts from the region, *The Struggle over Democracy in the Middle East* examines democracy and democratization in the light of regional realities rather than the wishful thinking of outsiders. Specialists from the Middle East analyze democratic prospects in the region, while accomplished scholars from the United States and the United Kingdom analyze Western policy, providing a wide-ranging survey of the efforts of individual countries and the effect of external influences. Addressing themes including sectarianism, culture, religion, security, and the promotion of democracy, the book examines the experiences of activists, political parties, religious groups, and governments and highlights the difficulties involved in bringing democracy to the Middle East. Providing a multifaceted approach to the issue of democratization, this book will be a valuable reference for courses on Middle Eastern politics, political science, and democracy.

Nathan J. Brown is a professor of political science and international affairs at the George Washington University, where he is the director of the Institute for Middle East Studies. He also serves as a non-resident senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

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The UCLA Center for Middle East Development (CMED) series on Middle East security and cooperation is designed to present a variety of perspectives on a specific topic, such as democracy in the Middle East, dynamics of Israeli–Palestinian relations, Gulf security, and the gender factor in the Middle East. The uniqueness of the series is that the authors write from the viewpoint of a variety of countries so that, no matter what the issue, articles appear from many different states, both within and beyond the region. No existing series provides a comparable, multinational collection of authors in each volume. Thus, the series presents a combination of writers from different countries who, for political reasons, do not always publish in the same volume. The series features a number of subthemes under a single heading, covering security, social, political, and economic factors affecting the Middle East.

1 The Struggle over Democracy in the Middle East

Regional politics and external policies

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Preface

The Center for Middle East Development of the International Institute at UCLA (CMED) is pleased to present the first installment in our book series on Middle East security and cooperation. The series is designed to offer discussions on the current problems in the Middle East with volumes that are unique because the participating authors are from a variety of countries and provide a range of perspectives on a specific topic. We envision that this diversity will contribute directly to the global discourse on the ongoing developments in the region.

The Editors want to extend our deepest gratitude to James Whiting, Acquisitions Editor for Middle Eastern & Islamic Studies, of Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, who has served as such a critical asset to us in the complex preparation of these exciting, but complicated to prepare, volumes. We greatly appreciate the patience and dedication of Suzanne Richardson, Editorial Assistant, Middle East and Asian Studies for Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, who assisted us so admirably in preparing this manuscript. We also want to extend our thanks to Professor David Newman, who first conceived of the exercise and placed us in contact with Routledge. And we deeply appreciate the work and gargantuan efforts that are being pursued by the editors and authors responsible for each volume, and of course our International Advisory Board. We also wish to recognize the support to this project and CMED provided by the Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation (IGCC) of the University of California based at UC San Diego.

UCLA's Center for Middle East Development (CMED) conducts research and provides educational programs on political, economic, and diplomatic development in the Middle East.

CMED programs approach these issues through a multi-tiered regional security program. Through reports and monographs, CMED explores key subjects on the region, including but by no means limited to democratic culture, regional business and economics, gender issues, media, technological cooperation across borders, and a full range of security and political issues including strategic challenges in cooperative and conflictual contexts and specific dynamics of regional problems such as the Arab-Israeli dispute, Iraq, and Iran. This series is a product of these studies and the promotion of intellectual interchange to which CMED is committed.

We expect that this volume and those that will follow will offer the highest possible quality to our readers so that we will be able to fulfill our goal of providing unique and stimulating discussions as the series expands. The series is four years in preparation, and we are delighted to present this first book, *The Struggle over Democracy in the Middle East: Regional Politics and External Policies*.

Over the past few years, the issue of democracy in the Middle East has provoked alternative waves of cynicism and irrational exuberance. Western pundits and policy makers have swung between viewing democracy as impossible or irrelevant (and maybe both) and as absolutely essential to world peace and security.

The manic Western debate over Middle East democracy has tended to obscure a more fine-grained and nuanced regional discussion. The purpose of this volume is to bring a variety of perspectives to the question; most of the contributors are from the Middle East and all have a deep familiarity with regional politics. The focus is much more on analysis than on policy prescription—though it might not be a bad idea if policy makers looked hard at an analysis of current realities before leaping into the fray of the efforts to promote political reform in the region.

The picture that emerges from the contributions to this volume is not particularly optimistic but they are not devoid of hope. When the volume's editors, Nathan J. Brown and Emad El-Din Shahin, ask themselves the question of whether democracy is occurring in the region, their answer is "In a word, no." But they hasten to add, "political developments in the region are far more interesting than the simple (if accurate) negative view suggests." What we present in this volume is that far more interesting picture of the struggle for democracy in the region.

Steven L. Spiegel, UCLA
Elizabeth G. Matthews, CSUSM

1 Introduction

Nathan J. Brown and Emad El-Din Shahin

This book is an effort to engage academics and activists interested in the Middle East with the prospects for democracy in the region. All of the contributors are familiar not only with the politics of the Middle East but also with various social science approaches to issues of democracy and democratization. The only authors not from the region itself are those who write on the policies of the United States and Europe.

A bleak landscape for democrats?

For many area experts, the state of democratic transformation in the Middle East region, particularly the Arab world, does not look promising. Most countries in the region are faced with obstinate domestic and external obstacles that make democracy seem like a distant dream. The peoples of the Middle East live under autocratic and authoritarian systems; few would question the desirability of the political systems becoming viable and functioning democracies. But paths of transition are far from obvious, and the dedication of key actors to the practical realities of democracy is questionable at best. Even the recent US and European Union (EU) drive to promote democracy has been blunted by the harsh and all too familiar press of security concerns and interests.

To many, therefore, the future of democracy in the region is bleak. Some might rightly reach this conclusion on the basis of persistent domestic structural obstacles, while it may appear to others that the future of democratic transformation (or any political change) in the region will always be predicated on the interest and security concerns of the external actors. After all, the Middle East is not Eastern Europe where Western security interests and democratic transition seemed to coincide for a decade.

When compared with countries in other regions, such as Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Africa, which had limited prior experience of democracy yet still managed to achieve some form of democratic transition, the countries of the Middle East stand out for the small and limited extent of change. Unlike those other areas, where political leaders lost their ability to manage events, autocratic regimes in the Middle East are in control of the process of

political change. And most still enjoy the support and backing of the Western powers. Thus, when apparently democratizing changes occur, they deliver far less than they promise: elections are held on a regular basis but are not clean, pluralistic, or competitive; the legal and institutional structures associated with the rule of law are elaborate and often well established but restrictive and under executive domination; the scope of political and social association has been broadened but remains controlled and ineffective. Whenever the region seems to be taking a step forward toward transformation, countervailing strategies by nimble leaders and regimes seem to set the process several steps backwards.

Signs of hope?

There is thus much basis for despair, but a more thorough look at the state of the process of democratization in the region might still give some hope.

On the intellectual level, there are indications that democratic pressures are more deeply rooted than previously realized and reflect genuine local conditions more than external pressures. The debate over democracy is decades old. The Arab defeat in 1967 generated vigorous debates among Arab intellectuals about the need for democracy, citizenship rights, constitutional legitimacy, popular participation, government accountability, and the promotion of democratic values. Most of this debate remained confined to a small circle of intellectual elites and did not penetrate the grassroots levels until recently.

But that may be changing. Looking at the societal level, and bearing in mind that democratization is a gradual process, one can safely reach the conclusion that democracy is increasingly gaining roots and that the societies of the region are gradually acquiring experiences with democratic practices and institutions. That is clearly different from claiming that democracy is becoming a primary value for the people of the region. Other issues are perhaps far more important than democracy for most regional residents. This is, of course, true for those outside of the region as well, but in the Middle East, so many other issues seem especially pressing: military threats to Arab security and sovereignty; the daily struggle for social and economic survival; and the global threats to culture and identity. That might partially explain why people in the region are readily willing to protest against the Israeli and US military actions in the region and/or against cartoons defaming the prophet of Islam, while sporadically and reluctantly taking to the street to demand more freedoms. But even here, one can note a stronger social basis for democratic change: many residents of the region have come to see the battle for justice, security, survival, and identity as linked rather than opposed to the battle for democratic change.

At the level of the process, political opening and liberalization started in the region long before September 11, 2001, even before the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Egypt's political liberalization started only one year after the collapse of Franco's regime and Spain's transition to democracy. Tunisia

allowed for some sort of pluralism in 1974, and moved from a single party to a multiparty system in 1981. Algeria's "perestroika" took place in 1989, the same year that marked the end of the communist regime in the Soviet Union and earlier than many East European countries. King Hussein of Jordan scrapped martial law in 1989 and legalized political parties in 1992. In 1989 and 1993, Jordan witnessed fairly free legislative elections. Contrary to the wide generalizations that view the Arab regimes as immune to changes, in fact, compared with two or three decades ago, the Arab regimes have been transforming in response to increasing pressures for political liberalization.

And it must be noted that democratic institutions and processes do exist in the Middle East, however frequently they are robbed of their vitality. Elections have been taking place in the Middle East region on a frequent and regular basis. According to Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Elections have become a common feature of the political landscape of the Middle East and North Africa."¹ Within a decade (1989–99), eighty elections at the local, municipal, provincial, and national levels have taken place. Each year, one type of election was held in one or more countries in the region. Voter turnout has remarkably been very high ranging from 69 percent to almost 90 percent.² This does not necessarily mean that the region is really democratizing. In the Arab world, none of these elections produced major policy shifts or transformations of the system. (And since that period, only the Palestinian parliamentary elections of 2006 saw an incumbent party defeated.) In addition, it is difficult to characterize these elections as free and transparent. Most were carefully structured, and the election outcome was easily predicted. The elections were used to enhance the eroding legitimacy of Arab regimes and reinforce their claims of adhering to legal procedures and democratic practices. On the positive side, they may indicate in some cases that the people of the region are acquiring an experience and a culture of electoral practices that could be useful in any future democratic transformation.

While the motivations of leaders in allowing change can (and should) be questioned, the region has recently experienced some meaningful structural reforms, even in unlikely countries. In 1992, following the First Gulf War, Saudi Arabia introduced a series of reforms aimed at streamlining its system of government. It introduced the Basic Law of Government (a kind of constitution); established an *appointed* Consultative Council; and reorganized the Kingdom's provincial governance. More recently, municipal elections were held in 2005 (half the members of the local councils were directly elected). Official promises have been made to allow for Saudi women's participation in the next elections. If these promises are kept, they could certainly generate societal changes. Earlier in 2003, Saudi Arabia allowed for a structured National Dialogue to debate the prospects of reform, direct elections to an association of Saudi journalists, and the establishment of a semi-independent National Association for Human Rights in 2004. After intense debates and a long wait (since 1975), Kuwaiti women were finally granted the right to participate in the political process as voters and candidates, beginning with the

2006 parliamentary elections. For the first time in that country's history, a woman assumed a cabinet position. Over the past few years, Bahrain has embarked on a series of significant political reforms and structural changes that included the release of political prisoners, scrapping the emergency laws and state security courts, granting women the right to vote and to stand as candidates in the national elections, holding legislative elections in 2002 and again in 2006 by universal suffrage (restoring parliamentary life after a gap of nearly three decades). In 2002, six women were appointed to the Upper House, the *Shura* Council; and two years later, the first female minister joined the cabinet. In Qatar, voters voted for a constitution in 2003 that allowed for the establishment of a forty-five member parliament, two thirds of which is directly elected. The constitution also expanded the margin of political and civil rights and public freedoms as it guaranteed the freedom of association (although not the formation of political parties) and the freedom of expression. Other countries in the region with relatively long experience in liberalization, such as Algeria, Egypt, and Morocco, introduced some reforms to their existing laws—electoral, press, party formation, and even constitutional amendments—to allow for some form of national reconciliation, more competitive elections, more political pluralism, and/or more freedom of expression. Across the Middle East, civil society organizations, particularly the advocacy oriented, emerged and gradually began to acquire some skills and address various reform demands.

A more realistic assessment

None of these reforms should be taken to indicate that there is a clear or linear movement toward democratization. Most of these steps are not only limited in effect but also double edged: the restoration of the Bahraini parliament, for instance, came with the creation of an appointed upper house designed to act as a check on the restored democratic body. And gerrymandering prevented the parliament from reflecting the true distribution of popularity among various political forces.

One of the most fundamental limitations of the wave of political reforms is closely related to the motivation behind them. All are top-down efforts undertaken to enhance the grip of faltering authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes on power. Most of these reforms are perceived to have been promoted by internal instability or external pressure. The rulers reacting to such pressures are seeking to parry off demands for future change; none have yet accepted democracy as a primary value. These reforms have been selectively designed to absorb domestic popular dissatisfaction, as well as to ease an increasing Western anxiety over their vital interests in the region. The driving force behind them is to address the need that most of these regimes feel to salvage their eroding legitimacy, prolong their authority, and continue to secure the support of outside actors. Once these regimes feel that the pressure has eased, they revert to their old repressive practices (witness the de-liberalization in

Jordan 2001, or in Egypt following the parliamentary elections in late 2005). The reforms are occurring in the absence of any clear vision of democracy as a concept and the instruments that would lead to its fulfillment. Incumbents seek a democratic transformation that falls short of the possibility of power transfer, fully accountable government, true representation, and the presence of effective political parties. Even those pressuring for reform often focus their demands on the transfer of power, without sufficiently considering the structural and institutional requisites that could make an effective democratic transformation and consolidation of democracy possible. There are growing demands for change and reform, but understanding of the mechanism to achieve them is still underdeveloped.

The seeming wave of reforms can be criticized on another basis as well: they may bring changes but, taken as a whole, they certainly do not amount to democratization and indeed barely affect the existing imbalances that continue to characterize the distribution of power among branches of the state and between state and society. There is a remarkable disparity between the powers of the executive and the legislature, which is almost controlled by the former. The heads of the executive in monarchical or republican systems alike enjoy extensive formal powers that range from vetoing their parliaments, appointing their cabinets, declaring states of emergency, suspending political life, or ruling by decree. And their informal powers—unwritten but very real rules by which they dominate the party system, the parliament, and sometimes the judiciary—augment their already formidable positions.

Thus, the legislative and monitoring powers of parliaments in the region are remarkably weak. This weakness precludes the possibility for the evolution of the necessary legal and constitutional frameworks that can effectively push the process of democratic transformation further. The existing parliaments usually succeed in passing laws that circumvent and outmaneuver the demands for reforms. Most parliaments in the region are not representative. They are often appointed rather than elected bodies. Sometimes their appointment comes in the formal sense, with some or all deputies appointed by the head of the state. More often, however, membership is formally elected but dominated by rigged electoral procedures and by a state party through a manipulated electoral system. Popular political actors are often excluded (or, in more recent years, included but marginalized), a phenomenon that adversely reflects on the effectiveness of the political life and the opposition parties.

One major consequence of this situation is that pro-reform actors remain unable to pass laws that promote a genuine democratic transformation. The continuous state of exclusion and marginalization also forces the opposition parties to atrophy and generates a state of apathy on the part of large segments of the population, often manifest by a conspicuously low voter turnout and widespread indifference to political life. In sum, the transformation that is currently taking place and the way it is being engineered should not conceal the persisting authoritarian practices, absence of adequate channels of participation, and low capacity of the opposition. Thus, the changes that have

taken place have not limited the powers of the ruling elite or allowed for some form of real power sharing. At best, they open some limited political space; at worst, they merely mask the authoritarian nature of the regime and create a superficial atmosphere of change that allows for a further manipulation of the political process through cunning cooptation, containment, and/or repression.

One can still argue that, as cosmetic and manipulated these reforms may seem, they will certainly have a residual and incremental effect on the Middle Eastern society's capacity and experience with democratization. Several recent developments clearly reflect some positive signs. First, there is a growing realization on the part of the regimes that it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain the status quo through the application of systematic violence and brutal force alone. Second, many Middle Eastern societies are increasingly willing and able to articulate public demands for reform and more political and social rights. The region has experienced an upsurge in demonstrations and public protests expressing such demands in the past few years. Third, despite the continued weakness of civil society, several pro-reform grassroots movements and groups have been formed, crystallizing at different times some form of an agreement over a list of political demands. Many have broken the fear barriers and put the regime and its leading members (the untouchable symbols) under close scrutiny. Finally, the states in the region have adopted a neoliberal economic model in an attempt to reform their economic performance. This model, which is based on liberalization and private initiative, should eventually reduce the state control and enhance the economic and political capacity of the society. Further, as the implementation of this model will produce losers, primarily the salaried middle classes and the lower classes, the regimes have to accompany the process with political openings to absorb these discontented groups.

The great challenge now for the pro-reform actors in the region lies in developing the necessary instruments to exploit the openings, limited though they are, that have occurred. And they cannot do so without casting democratic values and practices in terms that resonate with the region's particular history, culture, and socio-political realities. Such a process might be facilitated by several efforts: the development of an informal national consensus or even a more formal accord that guides present and future political practices; coalition building; preparing the necessary constitutional and legal frameworks for a transitional phase; insisting on independent monitoring of national elections; and neutralizing the external support for the authoritarian regimes in the region.

This volume

In this volume, we have asked a variety of scholars and activists in the region to examine the prospects for democracy from a variety of angles. But we have also asked external analysts to review and analyze the role of external actors who appear to have embraced the cause of Middle Eastern democratization

so enthusiastically. We begin with those externally focused essays. Nathan J. Brown and Amy Hawthorne examine the evolution of American policy, emphasizing the evolutionary nature of American policy and its growing embrace of democratization. They argue that the Bush democratization agenda was less of a departure than it appeared: while it led to a brief but intense period of soaring reform rhetoric, it never found the policy tools to realize the vision and ultimately beat a retreat under intense pressures. While American support for democratization programs did not disappear, the effort reverted to the collection of modest, politically safe, and opportunistic efforts that characterized American democratization efforts in the region since their beginning in the 1990s. Richard Youngs explores European policy, focusing on the relationship between security and democratization. His frank discussion of the facile assumptions underlying the claimed coincidence of democratic values and security interests provides a sobering reminder of the quandaries faced by external actors. Youngs does not advocate a reversion to a cynical realism that abandons any claim of linkage between regional political reform and Western security interests. But he does observe that the two alternative approaches that have emerged in recent years—working for security through promoting reform and through ignoring it—rest uneasily with each other. No middle path has been found in which reform has become one of a set of tools for promoting Western security. Instead, in a sense, we have the worst of both worlds—much talk about political reform but little sustained commitment to it. The result is likely to be only deepening political cynicism among Western policy makers and regional publics. Youngs, Brown, and Hawthorne all describe external actors who base their policy on overlooking some difficult choices and unresolved contradictions.

Two scholars from the region also give a general overview of Middle East democratization efforts. Shlomo Avineri compares the Middle Eastern experience with that of other regions, with a special focus on the transitions in the former Soviet bloc. Avineri rejects a narrow cultural determinism, but his essay still points to some severe difficulties, such as lack of a usable democratic past; the weakness of civil society; and the weakness of democratic political culture. Avineri is just short of grim about regional realities, but he clearly views the challenges as enormous and believes that those who wish for reform in the region have been dealt a difficult hand indeed. He does find some kind words for external efforts but also cautions about excessive expectations. The clear conclusion is that democracy is a long and difficult historical process and much of the region is only—and at best—beginning that journey. Walid Kazziha starts from a very different point—one which rejects some of the cultural and historical claims of Avineri—but ultimately comes to similar conclusions about the outlook for democracy. He turns the focus to internal aspects of the struggle for democracy in the Arab world. While aware of external interest, Kazziha finds Western discussions strangely disconnected from those in the region. He does find that interest in democracy has a long history among intellectuals and therefore argues that the weakness of

democracy is far less on the intellectual and much more on the practical level: a democratic environment will only emerge when genuine political constituencies appear on the scene and pave the way for the emergence of a vibrant political life in Arab societies. Until that time, talk about democracy will remain only talk.

In another essay focusing on the region as a whole, Azza Karam insists on questioning sharp divisions that are often taken to dominate politics in the region. She explores the main features of the debate on democracy occasioned by the rise of Islamist movements, examining Islamist stances toward democracy, the nature of their practices, and the reasons for and implications of their electoral appeal.

She shows how Islamist movements have arisen both because of the decline of secular movements and because of “blowback” from efforts by governments to suppress other forms of dissent or to use them for other purposes. Extremists in the region and in the West pursue the “clash of civilizations” and seem to wish for one, but there is far more common ground than the extremists want to see emerge.

The final section of the volume consists of a series of case studies: Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. For Egypt, Emad El-Din Shahin assesses the political developments that Egypt has experienced over the past few years and the prospects for a democratic transformation. He analyzes the changes, or calculated reforms, that the regime has introduced to the system as a way to contain a growing popular discontent and outside pressure. He also investigates the impact of these changes on the political dynamics and major actors within Egyptian society. Shahin sees these changes to have produced positive political outcomes. However, they fall short of placing Egypt on a genuine democratic transformation.

Shadi Hamid turns our attention from a presidential republic to the Jordanian monarchy, testing the argument—surprisingly commonplace in recent years—that Arab monarchies are friendlier to democratization than republics. He thus examines the Jordanian experience in comparison with the republican Egyptian counterexample. He concludes that monarchies in the region have proven to be effective initiators of reform but that such efforts fall prey to clear structural and institutional limits.

In his essay, Bassel F. Salloukh poses the question of why democratic transition did not take place in Lebanon. Unlike the monarchies and the presidential republics, conditions in Lebanon would seem to be more favorable for democracy, but Salloukh demonstrates how sectarianism, regional factors, and external actors (including the US) have inhibited democratic development. Democratic structures and mechanisms have survived Lebanese confessionalism only by molding themselves completely to it.

Finally, Ersin Kalaycioglu examines the history of republican Turkey, focusing on the two poles of secularism and Islamism, or what he terms competing “positivist” and “Islamic revivalist” positions. Examining public opinion polls, he shows that the sharp dichotomy between the religious and secular dimensions at the level of the political elite seems to break down—at least in

part—at the level of popular preferences and practices. In a sense, the relationship between religion and public life becomes less clear the closer one is to the ground. In some ways, Kalaycioglu is one of the volume's more sanguine authors. He is certainly not unaware of how complicated the issues are—noting at one point the odd feature of the wife of the country's current president earlier having pursued a lawsuit on a core emotional issue (women's head covering) against the government even while her husband sat as prime minister. Kalaycioglu views the struggle over Turkish culture and identity—as intractable as it seems—as increasingly amenable to democratic politics. Instead of suppressing the struggle or imposing a specific solution, the current incarnation of the Turkish republic is uneasily managing it through democratic structures and procedures. Ironically, it may be elections themselves (the very strong showing by the currently governing AKP party) that lead to an end to careful negotiation of Turkey's differences.

The essays in this volume thus examine a wide variety of experiences from a number of different perspectives. Despite this apparent cacophony, some strong areas of consensus emerge. We will turn our attention to those in the conclusion.

Notes

1 Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Is the Middle East Democratizing?" *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (1999): 199.

2 Ibid.: 204.