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MIDDLE EAST DEMOCRACY: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NEXT PRESIDENT

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The Middle East and the transnational threats it has spawned have been a focal point of debate among U.S. presidential candidates in 2016, suggesting the region's turmoil will demand time, diplomacy and resources irrespective of who wins office. While the region's various conflicts receive the attention of presidential hopefuls, the key question of democracy promotion and human rights in the Middle East is being neglected or even scorned. All candidates have thus far shared a reluctance in becoming too entrenched in the Middle East's woes, but failing to address the dearth of democracy and personal liberties in the region, and pursuing a military-only approach, will not resolve the region's instability. Charles W. Dunne, MEI scholar and former U.S. diplomat, argues that the next U.S. administration should steer its policy toward democracy promotion across the region.

KEY POINTS

- ◆ Demands for democracy and greater political space will return in the Middle East. Old methods of repression will not hold back the tide
- ◆ The factors that spawned the Arab Spring remain in place, which should deeply concern U.S. policymakers
- ◆ U.S. interest in stabilizing the region requires addressing the underlying causes of instability, including a lack of democracy and political participation
- ◆ The next administration should increase funding for civil society in the region, among other democratization tools, and broadly endorse the opening of political space and respect for human rights
- ◆ The United States should condition its military assistance to regional allies on improving human rights and democratic reform

INTRODUCTION

The 2016 presidential candidates, when they speak about the Middle East at all, have focused on the fight against ISIS, the chaos engulfing Syria, Iraq, and Libya and the increased threat of terrorism. The nuclear deal with Iran has been both attacked and supported. President Barack Obama has been criticized as weak on the Middle East, and also defended for his restraint. Dangers to the United States emanating from the region have been hotly debated, as has the wisdom of military interventions. There are frequent disagreements on the main causes of the conflicts in the region, and what the United States could or should do in response.

Far less attention has been paid to human rights and the need for democratic change, the lack of which underlies much of the ongoing turmoil. In fact, the campaigners have often cast these issues in a suspect and negative light. Rarely do any of the candidates present a hopeful political vision that offers an alternative to violent extremism and its ideological supporters, or consider such a vision a viable element in the next administration's policy. This is unfortunate, because important American interests are at stake.

Demands for democracy and wider political space—while they have certainly retreated in the face of advancing chaos, the threat of ISIS, and strenuous authoritarian pushback—are likely to return eventually. Youth populations in the Arab states, which helped fuel revolution in Tunisia and Egypt, continue to grow as a percentage of



the region's population.¹ Their demands today remain very similar to what they were in 2011, when the Arab Spring began: social justice, jobs, dignity, and greater freedom of expression, including the right to criticize their governments without fear of reprisal. Now, as then, most governments have been unable or unwilling to effectively address these concerns. Widespread use of social media and other technological platforms has made it easier than ever to communi-

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cate politically, organize, and access unfiltered information from a variety of sources, empowering those who would pressure governments for political change. Simple repression, the fallback response of many governments in the region, is unlikely to hold back the tide for decades, as in the past. Witness Egypt, where the government of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi is facing growing unrest; the president’s popularity has declined since the military’s removal of President Morsi in 2013; and terrorism has increased and political demonstrations persisted, despite a massive security crackdown.

Thus, even though the Arab Spring may have stalled, the factors that helped bring it about remain in place. This should deeply concern American policymakers, as the next wave of upheaval may be more disruptive than the last. Increasing radicalization would fuel the growth of terrorist movements as well as the conditions necessary for Islamist-driven revolutions in unstable countries. Accelerated refugee flows to Europe and elsewhere, brought about by violent civil conflicts, would threaten U.S. friends and allies. Needless to say, all of this would severely impact American security interests and the political-military order

the United States helped construct and arbitrate over the course of decades. The United States is badly in need of a strategy that supports America’s interest in stability and security while helping regional countries manage popular demand for political change and respect for basic freedoms. Discussion of such a strategy has been lacking in the 2016 campaign.

THE CANDIDATES

The U.S. candidates have laid out different approaches both to Middle East policy in general and the best way to respond to political upheaval there. But one thing they do have in common is profound uneasiness with the chaos in the region and reluctance to become too deeply involved.

Donald J. Trump, the presumptive Republican nominee, has ascribed to a dystopian view. In his foreign policy speech² to the Center for the National Interest on April 27, 2016, he made clear that he thought the Obama Administration was wrong to support the ouster of Mubarak and intervene in Libya, and fail to make good on President Barack Obama’s so-called “red line” in Syria:

We went from mistakes in Iraq to Egypt to Libya, to President Obama’s line in the sand in Syria. Each of these actions have helped to throw the region into chaos and gave ISIS the space it needs to grow and prosper. Very bad. It all began with a dangerous idea that we could make west-

ern democracies out of countries that had no experience or interests in becoming a western democracy...He supported the ouster of a friendly regime in Egypt that had a longstanding peace treaty with Israel, and then helped bring the Muslim Brotherhood to power in its place... We've made the Middle East more unstable and chaotic than ever before... Instead of trying to spread universal values that not everybody shares or wants....

Trump has also suggested a temporary ban on Muslims from entering the United States and keeping Syrian refugees out of the country, in addition to advocating anti-terror tactics that would likely violate both U.S. and international law—proposals later walked back by the candidate. Taken together, Trump's expressed views suggest a Middle East policy that would take a scorched earth approach toward terrorism, broadly defined, with slight regard for collateral damage whether political or military. A Trump presidency would likely make common cause with authoritarian allies and get out of the business of promoting democratic change and political liberalization.

On the Democratic side, **former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton** has not indicated a firm public position (her campaign website doesn't even mention the Middle East).³ Her policy speeches to think tanks and other venues have all emphasized traditional American concerns: the importance of defending Israel; the need to re-

solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; the threat of Iran (and support for the nuclear deal); as well as Gulf security. And she has carved out a reputation as being generally more hawkish than President Obama.

Her speech to the America Israel Political Action Committee (AIPAC) on March 21, 2016 did hint at some reluctance to do business as usual with Middle Eastern autocrats. She supported political change in Iran, if not necessarily among our Arab allies. Clinton said that "Candidates for president who think the United States can outsource Middle East security to dictators, or that America no longer has vital national interests at stake in this region are dangerously wrong... At the same time, America should always stand with those voices inside Iran calling for more openness... they should know we will support their efforts to bring positive change to Iran."⁴ Thus, it is likely a President Clinton would maintain focus on regional stability while underplaying the advance of human rights and democratization among America's Arab allies, at the same time ramping up pressure on Tehran

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to grant wider political space. Her apparent sensitivity to the perils of too-cozy relationships with regional strongmen would be unlikely to extend to dramatic reevaluations of important regional relationships.

Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont has had little say on foreign policy in general, although he does have clear views on certain points of Middle East policy. He has often lambasted Clinton's vote in favor of the Iraq war (which he has called a disaster

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that de-stabilized the region) and expressed dismay at the aftermath of the Libyan intervention during Clinton's time as Secretary of State. He has also accused Clinton of being too willing to resort to the use of force. His positions on other issues generally accord with hers, such as support for the nuclear agreement with Iran, steadfast backing for Israel, and the importance of settling the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Sander's prepared remarks for AIPAC in March 2016⁵ laid out his Middle East agenda. Sanders covered the Palestinian conflict with Israel in detail—including criticism of

Israeli actions against the Palestinians, such as land expropriations and the Gaza war—and provided a tour d'horizon of other regional issues. But Sanders only glancingly referred to human rights in a reference to Saudi Arabia as a “repressive regime,” and ignored the broader issue of personal freedoms and democratic change throughout the region.

Indeed, the self-described Democratic Socialist has established no clear record of his views on democracy in the Middle East throughout his campaign. One can assume Sanders would be wary of policies intended to influence internal regional politics and vigorously reinforce American support for human rights and democratic values.

Notwithstanding the reluctance or outright contempt with which the leading candidates have approached these issues—or have failed to approach them all—the next administration will nevertheless need to review its policy choices on promotion of democratic values and human freedoms as it develops its overall strategy toward the Middle East.

After all, the promotion of human freedoms at home and abroad has been a core value of the United States since the founding of the nation, and one of the organizing principles upon which U.S. foreign policy has long been based, implicitly if not often overtly. As former Secretary of State Henry

A. Kissinger notes in his book *World Order*, “The openness of American culture and its democratic principles made the United States a model and refuge for millions...For Thomas Jefferson, America was not only a great power in the making but an ‘empire for liberty’—an ever-expanding force acting on behalf of all humanity to vindicate principles of good governance.”⁶

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

With this long tradition and its particular relevance to the Middle East in mind, the following recommendations may help frame the debate for the next president and administration.

Fix the harm campaign rhetoric has done by retooling the way the United States speaks about political change in the Middle East. The next president and his or her officials should broadly endorse opening of political space and respect for basic norms of human rights. These include freedoms of expression, assembly, and religion, as well as upholding rights of women and minorities. The administration should publicly support states who have made strides in the right direction, and call out those who have consistently violated human rights norms; what is said in public is often more important than what is said behind closed doors.

The coming administration should also publicly support human rights defenders, especially those imprisoned for their work. This will help make the case to predominantly youthful and restive populations that the United States will not ignore promotion of basic human freedoms at their expense.

The United States should intensify its outreach to civil society organizations, who face growing repression from their governments. For many NGOs, access to foreign funding—often a principal source

“The next president should broadly endorse opening of political space and respect for basic norms of human rights”

of program funds—has been cut off; restrictions placed on their activities; contacts with international partners limited or criminalized; and their employees arrested. A wide range of rights groups and other organizations doing unrelated work have been closed, and a number of foreign organizations expelled from countries ranging from Egypt to the Gulf. The next president must make outreach to regional NGOs a point of emphasis for U.S. embassies in the region. It should also engage regional governments on these abuses, and work with American and European civil society to devise tactics to help them maintain ties and programs with NGOs in the region.

Offer stronger support for countries on the right political track. The United States should not declare victory—or failure for that matter—and let American diplomatic attention wander to the next crisis. For example, while the Obama administration rightly doubled assistance to Tunisia, the only one of the six Arab Spring countries that successfully moved toward democratic transition,⁷ in its FY 2016 budget, this is one success story that could benefit from even more robust financial and political support from the U.S. and Europe.⁸ Despite its monarchical form of government, Morocco may possibly become another success story down the road.

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The next administration might also look to the past for alternative ideas. The multilateral Forum for the Future, established under the Bush administration, once provided a creative vehicle for dialogue on a wide range of political and economic issues between regional governments, the United States and Europe. Most important, it per-

mitted civil society organizations from the region to engage in direct dialogue with their governments. While the situation has deteriorated since then and confrontation between civil society and government has intensified, at the right moment a revised, updated, and possibly renamed ‘forum’ might furnish a useful venue for discussion, rethinking and mediation among all concerned parties.

Increase funding for democracy promotion and human rights as a percentage of U.S. spending in the region. As the Project on Middle East Democracy has documented, “U.S. policy and foreign assistance in the Middle East and North Africa is currently

becoming even more dominated by military and security issues... A higher proportion of U.S. assistance to the MENA region today is budgeted for military and security assistance than was the case in 2010, despite public discussion in 2011 of ‘rebalancing’ aid to the region in the opposite direction.”⁹ This must be rethought by the next administration.

Make more frequent and effective use of international fora to highlight the most egregious human rights violators. The U.N.’s Universal Periodic Review of member states’ human rights records is one such venue; the U.N. Human Rights Council and its Special Procedure mechanism, which appoints independent experts to investigate and report on countries or thematic human rights issues, is another.¹⁰

Ensure that the promotion of democratic values and human rights is a whole-of-government effort. Given that

the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency do a great deal of the heavy lifting in regional diplomatic efforts, the next president should insist that they partner effectively with State, the National Security Council and other civilian

agencies to reinforce an American agenda in support of democratization and human rights. This is the only way to convince Middle Eastern governments to take the United States seriously on this score; they will otherwise, and correctly, assume their relationships with the administration really does boil down to security concerns alone.

Condition military assistance on progress toward political reform. U.S. security interests will remain paramount in most strategic calculations. But the United States is under no obligation to support the most egregious human rights abusers with unconditional military support; indeed, such a policy is a sure way to undermine those security interests. The United States should move toward conditioning certain types of military assistance, especially prestigious big-ticket weapons systems, on basic respect for human rights and permitting broader political space to enable democratic change.¹¹ In addition, the next administration should not shy from applying the

requirements of U.S. law, such as the Leahy Law, which bans aid to foreign military units involved in gross human rights violations—as well as Section 508 of the For-

“the United States is under no obligation to support the most egregious human rights abusers with unconditional military support”

eign Assistance Act, which prohibits all aid to a country whose duly-elected leadership has been overthrown by military coup. The Obama administration’s studious avoidance of the word “coup” following Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi’s 2013 ouster by the military sidestepped the clear intent of the law and sent the message that the United States would always favor its strategic and military interests over its political values, thus tacitly encouraging some of the Sisi government’s worst excesses.

These recommendations are by no means an exclusive list, and should be considered a starting point for the next president as he or she decides on a new approach toward the region. They would be a good place to begin a discussion of how to re-establish American credibility as a global leader in human rights among the peoples of the region and elsewhere in the world. The next president may find this to be a critical American interest after all.



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