



THE SABAN CENTER  
*for* MIDDLE EAST POLICY  
*at* THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

ANALYSIS PAPER

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Number 13, October 2007

UPGRADING  
AUTHORITARIANISM IN THE  
ARAB WORLD

STEVEN HEYDEMANN



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I wish to acknowledge, with thanks, the generous support of the Smith-Richardson Foundation for a larger project of which this analysis paper is a part. Ariel Ahram provided invaluable research assistance in the preparation of this paper. The views presented here are solely those of the author.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Authoritarianism in the Arab world is not what it used to be. Indeed, it might well be stronger, more flexible, and more resilient than ever, despite the best efforts of the United States, its European Union partners, and Arab democrats to bring about sustained and systematic political reform over the past two decades. While U.S. conceptions of Arab authoritarianism and U.S. strategies for promoting democratic reform have remained largely unchanged during this period, Arab regimes have not stood still. They have adapted by reorganizing strategies of governance to adjust to new global, regional, and domestic circumstances. Autocrats have not simply fallen back on coercion to fend off pressures for change—though repression remains a visible and potent element in the arsenal of Arab governments. Regimes have turned instead to a process that can best be described as “authoritarian upgrading.”

These emerging strategies of governance have undermined gains achieved by democracy promotion programs, and will continue to blunt their impact in the future. Has democracy promotion in its current form run its course? Has it outlived its usefulness? The possibility should be on the table. If democracy promotion has, even if unintentionally, provided Arab regimes with new tools for securing authoritarian forms of governance, should it be continued? If so, in what form?

At a minimum, authoritarian upgrading underscores the need to rethink how the U.S. pursues democracy

promotion and to recognize, in particular, that Arab regimes are converging around policies that are explicitly designed to stabilize and preserve authoritarian rule in the context of ongoing demands for political change. At the same time, authoritarian upgrading holds out clues to the kinds of democratic changes it is reasonable to expect in the Arab world, and how these are likely to differ from the Latin American and Eastern European experiences that have been a principal inspiration for U.S. democracy promotion policies worldwide. To be effective in this context, democracy promotion efforts must also adapt.

After twenty years, Arab regimes have become proficient at containing and disarming democracy promotion—if not exploiting it for their own purposes. Strategies that take advantage of the openings offered by authoritarian upgrading are more likely to advance democratic change in the Middle East than the continuation of policies that do not take into account how governance in the Arab world is being transformed. Two openings hold out particular promise:

- First, adapting U.S. democracy promotion policies to exploit more effectively the openings that upgrading itself produces;
- Second, taking steps to weaken the coalitions on which upgrading depends.

Both will require substantial adjustments in U.S. democracy promotion policies.

## THE AUTHOR

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# UPGRADING AUTHORITARIANISM

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*“Tunisia is our model. Just look at them! They are much more repressive than we are, yet the West loves them. We need to figure out how they do it.”*

Syrian political analyst, personal interview, May 2006.

In recent years, a new model of authoritarian governance has emerged in a number of key Arab states. A product more of trial and error more than intentional design, Arab regimes have adapted to pressures for political change by developing strategies to contain and manage demands to democratize. They have expanded political spaces—electoral arenas in particular—where controlled forms of political contestation can occur. They have also tempered their opposition to Islamist political participation. In some instances, notably Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco, Islamist representatives have secured meaningful representation in parliament.

Regimes have also adapted selectively to demands for economic liberalization and the integration of Arab economies into global markets, and expanded opportunities for social and economic elites. They have developed techniques for managing and easing public access to the internet and new communications technologies that until recently were resisted as potential carriers of democratic ideas. They have also recognized that authoritarian governance is not inconsistent with, and that its persistence may actually depend upon, the strengthening of state capacity and public services through programs such as civil service reform, education reform, and labor market reform.

In addition, upgrading has involved shifts in the foreign policies of Arab regimes. They increasingly seek

out trade, investment, and political ties with states that either share or are broadly sympathetic to the political concerns of Arab autocrats in the Levant and North Africa, such as the Arab monarchies in the Persian Gulf. They have built relations with states such as China that are largely indifferent to issues of human rights and democracy. This not a “zero sum game” for these Arab regimes. They continue to enhance their commercial relationships with European Union countries and the United States. Yet the diversification of their economic and political relationships generates new sources of leverage for Arab regimes in an international system dominated by the United States, even while diminishing the West’s economic and diplomatic influence.

Authoritarian upgrading consists, in other words, not in shutting down and closing off Arab societies from globalization and other forces of political, economic, and social change. Nor is it based simply on the willingness of Arab governments to repress their opponents. Instead, authoritarian upgrading involves reconfiguring authoritarian governance to accommodate and manage changing political, economic, and social conditions. It originated in no small part as a defensive response to challenges confronting Arab autocrats during the past two decades. In recent years, however, authoritarian upgrading has accelerated. It has benefited from U.S. failures in Iraq, and the association of democracy promotion with regime change, social violence and political chaos. Yet the core features

of authoritarian upgrading have been shaped more by concerns about how to sustain authoritarian governance in an era of global democratization than in response to U.S. experiences in Iraq.

Authoritarian upgrading takes a variety of forms, each influenced by the particular tensions facing individual regimes. Consequently, it would be a mistake to exaggerate its coherence. There is no single model or template of authoritarian upgrading that Arab regimes have followed. Nor should we overstate the capacity of Arab regimes to absorb and implement policy innovations.

What is clear, however, is that authoritarian upgrading is shaped by what might be called “authoritarian learning.” Lessons and strategies that originate within, and outside the Middle East, are diffused across the region, traveling from regime to regime and being modified in the process. Regimes learn from one another, often through explicit sharing of experiences.<sup>1</sup> However, they also learn by observing experiences elsewhere. Most recently, China has emerged as a model of particular interest for Arab governments exploring ways to improve economic performance without conceding political control. Yet learning goes well beyond fascination with the Chinese model.<sup>2</sup>

While attention was focused in the 1990s on prospects for global democratization, what transpired in much of the developing world was instead the globalization of new hybrid forms of authoritarian governance, including electoral-authoritarian, competitive authoritarian, and other hybrid regime types that exploit elements of openness and contestation

to reinforce systems of authoritarian rule.<sup>3</sup> The Arab world is often treated as exceptional in its resistance to democratization—a global outlier that avoided the so-called Third Wave of democratization. Yet its experience of authoritarian upgrading and the rise of new hybrid styles of authoritarian governance across the region place the Arab world squarely within leading global trends over the past decade or more. As a result, authoritarian upgrading in different countries exhibits shared features and reflects common perceptions among Arab autocrats and their counterparts outside the Middle East about how best to position their regimes to survive.

If upgrading has produced frameworks of authoritarian governance in the Arab world that are more flexible, open, and adept in confronting the demands of globalization, democratization, and market-based economic reforms, coercion nonetheless remains an important part of the mix. Arab regimes have conceded the commanding heights of authoritarian rule, opened limited space for civil societies, permitted opposition parties to operate more freely, broadened press freedoms, and acknowledged the legitimacy of human rights. Nonetheless, they continue ruthlessly to police the boundaries of acceptable political practice.

As Joshua Stacher has observed, in 2006 the Egyptian authorities cracked down on civil society activists and renewed emergency laws giving extraordinary power to security agencies in the teeth of U.S. opposition. Egypt has postponed local elections, arrested hundreds of members of the Muslim Brotherhood, placed the Muslim Brotherhood’s Supreme Guide under a travel ban, and prevented Muslim Brotherhood candidates

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<sup>1</sup> Anecdotal evidence exists concerning the development in recent years of regional networks of authoritarian expertise, with delegations traveling from one country to another to discuss issues such as how to manage the internet, respond to pressures for political reform, and ensure the fiscal autonomy of regimes.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen Lust-Okar, “Reform in Syria: Steering Between the Chinese Model and Regime Change,” Carnegie Paper No. 69 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2006), available at <<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=18505&prog=zgp&proj=zdl,zme>>.

<sup>3</sup> On hybrid regimes see Larry Diamond, “Thinking About Hybrid Regimes,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (April 2002), pp. 21-35; Andreas Schedler, “The Menu of Manipulation,” *Journal of Democracy*, op. cit., pp. 36-50; Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, “The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy*, op. cit., pp. 51-65; Nicolas van de Walle, “Africa’s Range of Regimes,” *Journal of Democracy*, op. cit., pp. 66-80.



from making additional gains in student and labor union elections.<sup>4</sup> Similar harassment and repression of opposition figures, especially those associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, have occurred throughout 2007. In Syria, 2006 was marked by the escalating repression of activists associated with the Beirut-Damascus Declaration issued in the spring of that year. Further crackdowns occurred in spring and summer of 2007. This ongoing campaign has included the arrests of dozens of journalists, intellectuals, and activists, and the imposition of travel bans on prominent dissidents.

In Tunisia, the convening of the World Summit on the Information Society in November 2005 was accompanied by increased repression and physical abuse of local and visiting civil society organizers, reporters, and internet activists. Even in Morocco, often cited as an exemplar of Arab reform, the political openings engineered by King Muhammad VI are now recognized

as steps toward reconfiguring authoritarianism rather than a process of democratization that would constrain the power of the monarchy.<sup>5</sup> Repression and human rights abuses also remain commonplace in Morocco, even if they are less severe or widespread than in many other Arab states.

What is emerging in the Arab world, therefore, is a hybrid form of authoritarianism. It combines tried-and-true strategies of the past—coercion, surveillance, patronage, corruption, and personalism—with innovations that reflect the determination of authoritarian élites to respond aggressively to the triple threat of globalization, markets, and democratization. These efforts are aimed at creating and sustaining an emerging “authoritarian coalition,” one that hinges on preserving existing bases of institutional and social support while strengthening ties to or at a minimum buying off, groups that have been regarded by regimes as unreliable, if not potentially antagonistic.

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<sup>4</sup> Joshua Stacher, “Election Exposure: Comparing the NDP and the Muslim Brothers in Egypt’s 2005 Legislative Elections,” paper prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association, November 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Marina S. Ottaway and Meredith Reilly, “Morocco: From Top-Down Reform to Democratic Transition,” Carnegie Paper No.71 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2006), available at <<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&tid=18747>>.

## KEY FEATURES OF AUTHORITARIAN UPGRADING

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Five features stand out as defining elements of authoritarian upgrading. All of these elements are evident in varying combinations in major Arab states, including Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen. Indeed, elements of these features are ubiquitous throughout the Arab world, although the particular mix differs from case to case. The five features are:

1. Appropriating and containing civil societies;
2. Managing political contestation;
3. Capturing the benefits of selective economic reforms;
4. Controlling new communications technologies;
5. Diversifying international linkages.

### APPROPRIATING AND CONTAINING CIVIL SOCIETIES

The hallmark of authoritarian upgrading is the ability of Arab regimes to exploit rather than resist broad social, political, and economic trends both to blunt the

challenges they might contain and to generate political resources that bolster regimes' hold on power. In few domains has this practice been as visible, widespread, successful—and for Western promoters of democracy less welcome—than in the effectiveness with which Arab regimes have appropriated and contained civil societies.

Beginning in the 1980s, civil society organizations proliferated throughout the Arab world. The expansion of Arab non-governmental organizations (NGOs) was in large measure a response to openings from above. Yet over the subsequent decade there was a new vibrancy in the civic and associational sectors in Algeria, Egypt, Kuwait, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, and Yemen.<sup>6</sup> By the early 1990s, Arab NGOs had become an active presence in the region's political life, working to advance agendas that included human rights, political reform, issues of governance and transparency, the environment, and women's rights, among others.

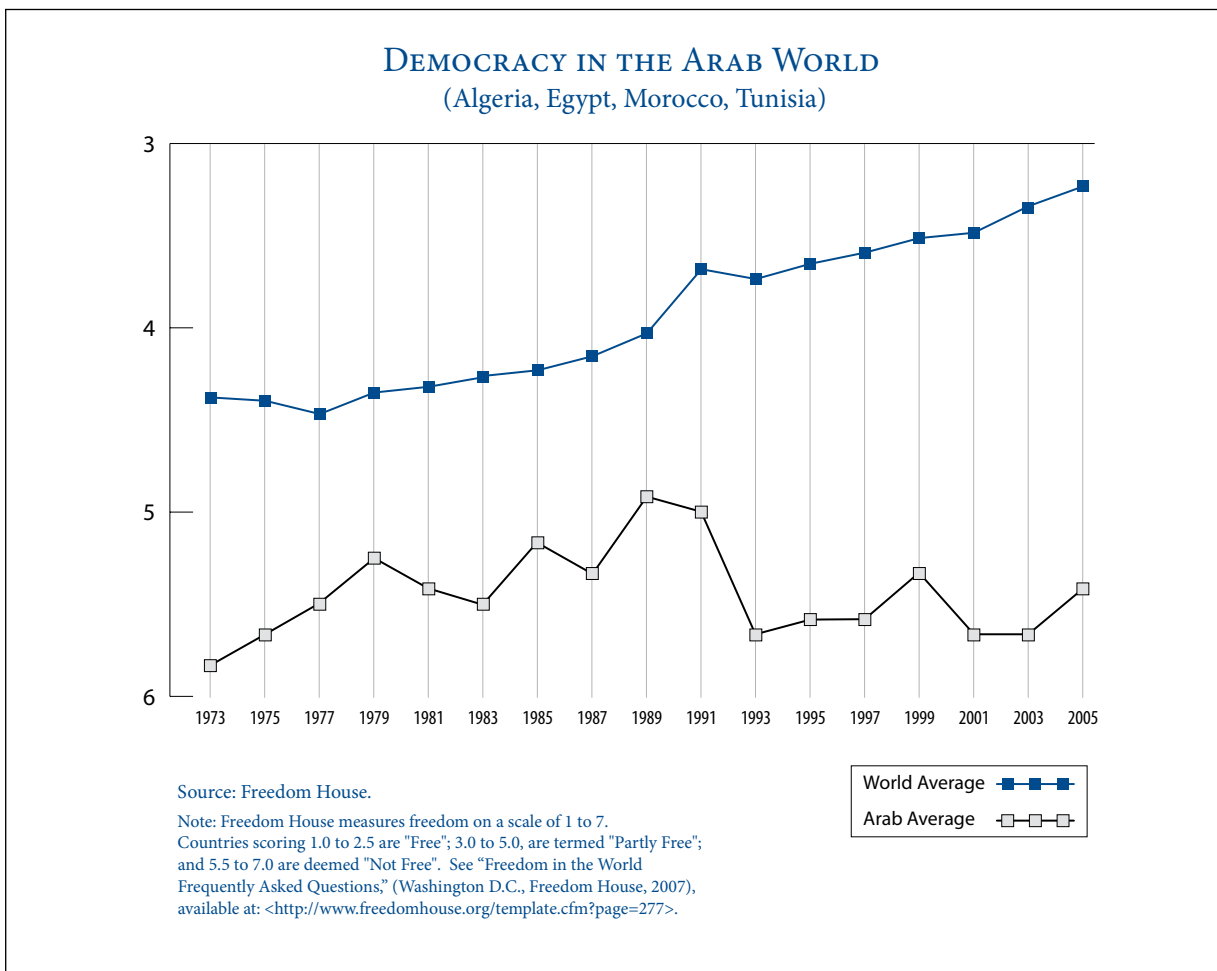
If Arab regimes initially viewed these openings as politically expedient—a means to improve their standing

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<sup>6</sup> The United Nations Development Program explicitly links civil society expansion in Morocco in the 1990s to the country's "close relations with the European Union," see Program on Governance in the Arab Region, *Civil Society Country Profiles: Morocco*, n.d., available at <<http://www.pogar.org/countries/civil.asp?cid=12>>. Guilain Denoeux points to three waves of expansion among civil society groups in Morocco, Jordan, Yemen, and Algeria. In the Moroccan case, he notes, these waves began in the early 1980s when regimes pursued linked but selective strategies of economic and political reform. Initially, civil society expansion was concentrated in service provision, then moved towards areas with a more explicitly political agenda. This expansion hit a peak in the early 1990s with the emergence of openly political advocacy organizations. See Guilain Denoeux, "Promoting Democracy and Governance in Arab Countries: Strategic Choices for Donors," paper presented at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization conference on "NGOs and Governance in Arab Countries," March 2000.

with Western donors and with international financial institutions at a moment of fiscal crisis—the speed and scope of the growth in civil societies led them to recalibrate the cost of political openings. Rather than shut down civil societies entirely, however, regimes gradually adopted a range of complex strategies to reassert state control over burgeoning civic sectors. In varying degrees, Arab regimes blended repression, regulation, cooptation and the appropriation of NGO functions by the state to contain the deepening of civil societies and to erode their capacity to challenge political authority.<sup>7</sup>

These trends are clearly visible in the graph “Democracy in the Arab World.” Data from Freedom House on variables relating to the degree of democracy in the Middle East and North Africa reflects the modest upward trend that was visible during the late 1980s and early 1990s in Arab countries. This brief period of openness was followed by the reassertion of state control, including increased restrictions on civil society activities and declining levels of overall democracy beginning in the late 1990s and continuing into the current decade.



<sup>7</sup> Maha M. Abdelrahman, *Civil Society Exposed* (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 2004).

Regime strategies that emerged to address the growing activism of civil societies included the repression of organizations that were deemed especially threatening—often those focusing on human rights, government accountability, and electoral reform—and the routine intimidation and harassment of leading political activists. Yet they featured other elements, as well, including the reform of legal frameworks governing NGOs to enhance the capacity of governments to regulate and control independent civil society organizations, as well as legal measures that did not target civil society *per se* but were seen by local NGOs as providing regimes with new mechanisms to intervene in and disrupt their work.<sup>8</sup> These include laws relating to media control, and new counterterrorism legislation enacted in both Jordan and Morocco in 2005.<sup>9</sup>

The most blatant example of the use of legal reform to contain civil societies was the highly controversial passage in 2002 of a revised Law of Associations in Egypt.<sup>10</sup> The new law—which replaced a 1999 version struck down by Egypt’s Supreme Court—imposed new restrictions on NGO activities and funding, limiting their access to external resources. It required as many as 16,000 Egyptian NGOs to re-register with the Ministry of Social Affairs. During this process the ministry rejected the applications of a number of well-known human rights and advocacy organizations, including the New Women Research Center.<sup>11</sup> The law also

prohibited NGOs other than registered political parties from participating in political activities, a broadly framed restriction that could be applied to the work of almost any advocacy organization.<sup>12</sup>

Egypt is not alone in using this tactic. Tunisia reformed its association law in 1992, imposing new conditions on NGOs that essentially forced the Tunisian Human Rights League to suspend its activities. The League reopened in 1993, adopted a much less confrontational stance in its relations with the government, but was forced to close again in 2000 under pressure from the regime. It has recently been the subject of government-initiated legal action. In October 2002, the Jordanian Society for Citizens’ Rights was closed by the Ministry of Interior for allegedly violating the Societies and Social Institutions Act. Similar practices are also evident in Morocco, where the U.S. State Department noted in 2005 that “under a decree restricting civil society organizations, persons who wish to create an organization are required to obtain the approval of the Ministry of Interior to hold meetings. In practice the ministry generally used this requirement to prevent persons suspected of advocating causes opposed by the government from forming legal organizations.”<sup>13</sup> Restrictions on NGO participation in politics are included in Jordan’s 1996 Law on Associations and Foundations, in modified form in Algeria’s Organic Law Governing Political Parties, amended in March 1997, and in Morocco’s Code of Public Liberties.

<sup>8</sup> Pete Moore and Bassel F. Salloukh, “Struggles Under Authoritarianism: Regimes, States, and Professional Associations in the Arab World,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (February 2007), pp. 53-76.

<sup>9</sup> Jillian Schwedler, “Don’t Blink: Jordan’s Democratic Opening and Closing,” *Middle East Report Online*, July 3, 2002, available at <<http://www.merip.org/mero/mero070302.html>>, comments on the deterioration of democratization in Jordan as a result of numerous “temporary” and “exceptional” measures passed into law from the mid-1990s onwards.

<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Egypt: Margins of Repression: State Limits on Nongovernmental Organization Activism*, Vol. 17, No. 8 (E), (New York: Human Rights Watch, July 2005), available at <<http://hrw.org/reports/2005/egypt0705/>>.

<sup>11</sup> International Center for Not-For-Profit Law, *New Women Research Center (NWRC) Case study on an NGO refused by the authorities (sic) in Egypt* (Washington D.C.: International Center for Not-For-Profit Law, 2005), available at <<http://www.icnl.org/knowledge/library/download.php?file=Egypt/refusal.pdf>> (registration required). The Ministry of Social Affairs’ decision refusing registration to the New Women Research Center was based on a letter from the Security Directorate in Giza to the ministry recommending that the group’s application under the new NGO law be rejected. The ministry’s decision was overturned after the New Women Research Center challenged it in court.

<sup>12</sup> As Quintan Wiktorowicz has argued about Jordan, civil society organizations created in the 1980s and 1990s “were embedded in a web of bureaucratic practices and legal codes which allows those in power to monitor and regulate collective activities. This web reduces the possibility of a challenge to the state from civil society by rendering much of collective action visible to the administrative apparatus. Under such circumstances, civil society institutions are more an instrument of state control than a mechanism of collective empowerment.” Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Civil Society as Social Control: State Power in Jordan,” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (October 2000), p. 43.

<sup>13</sup> United States Department of State, “Morocco,” *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices-2005*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor), March 8, 2006, available at <<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2005/61695.htm>>.

Without criminalizing NGOs across the board or engaging in blanket repression the introduction of these new frameworks for the governance of non-profit organizations and civic associations has weakened their autonomy and limited their capacity to challenge government policies and practices. They also contribute to a legal and institutional context that promotes fragmentation and competition among NGOs dependent upon scarce local resources. In addition, the complexity and opaqueness of regulatory regimes creates ambiguous legal environments, leaving civil society groups uncertain about the legality of everyday activities (for instance, what constitutes political participation?). Legal reforms are often seen by civil society activists as forcing NGOs to break the law by engaging in activities that are formally illegal but tolerated, exposing them to the constant threat of arbitrary government action should they fall out of favor or cross poorly-defined red lines.<sup>14</sup> As noted by Human Rights Watch in its coverage of Tunisia:

authorities have refused legal recognition to every truly independent human rights organization that has applied over the past decade. They then use the pretext of an organization's "illegal" status to hamper its activities. On September 3 [2005], police encircled the Tunis office of the non-recognized National Council on Liberties in Tunisia (CNLT) and, as they had done many times before, prevented members from meeting.<sup>15</sup>

Repression, however, comes at a cost. The suppression of independent NGOs has exposed Arab regimes to sharp criticism, damaging their reputations at home and abroad. To fend off this scrutiny, coercion has been supplemented by additional strategies through which regimes exploit the rhetoric and organizational frameworks of civil society to generate political resources that can be appropriated and used to their advantage.

In Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, for example, regime élites have become visible sponsors of semi-official NGOs that enjoy protected status, benefit from privileged relations with powerful political actors, but lack meaningful autonomy. These tend to be located in service provision, education, training, sports, youth development, and other areas that are seen as apolitical and therefore non-threatening.

First ladies in the Arab world are especially prominent as founders and sponsors of such semi-official NGOs. The wife of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad, Asma al-Asad, is the official sponsor of seven NGOs, including a youth organization, Shabab (Youth); Modernising and Activating Women's Role in Economic Development (MAWRED, meaning "the source" in Arabic), which focuses on strengthening women's participation in the economy; and the Rural Fund for Development of Syria (FIRDOS, meaning "paradise" in Arabic) which is active in the areas of microfinance, cultural conservation, education, women's empowerment, tourism, and the environment. Recently, all seven of these organizations were centralized within the Syrian Trust for Development. Queen Rania of Jordan established the Jordan River Foundation, which is active in the areas of microfinance, cultural conservation, education, women's empowerment, tourism, and the environment. Suzanne Mubarak, the wife of Egypt's president, has long been active as a sponsor and supporter of NGOs and a vocal advocate of Egypt's civil society in international forums, whether as president of Egypt's National Council of Women, founder and chair of the Heliopolis Services Development Society, patron of the Egyptian co-production of Sesame Street, or founder of the Egyptian Society For Childhood and Development, among other high-profile NGO affiliations.

Semi-official or privileged NGO sectors serve a number of useful functions. They often provide meaning-

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<sup>14</sup> Personal interview with NGO.

<sup>15</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Human Rights Overview: Tunisia" (New York: Human Rights Watch, n.d.), available at <<http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/01/18/tunisi12232.htm>>.

ful services to citizens, draw local and international attention to worthy causes, attract both domestic and international funding (with fewer restrictions than those imposed on independent civil society organizations) and are able by virtue of their prominent sponsors to act more boldly than independent counterparts. Despite these benefits, state-sponsored and dependent civil societies are incapable of playing an autonomous political role. They are largely unable to serve as mechanisms of accountability and transparency, as a check on government power, or as meaningful sources of civic mobilization. They offer regimes opportunities to posture as supporters of civil society while preventing the emergence of autonomous civic life and insulating themselves from any meaningful public accountability.

Finally, Arab regimes not only sponsor semi-official civil society sectors, they have themselves appropriated and internalized specific functions—notably advocacy and watchdog roles—pre-empting existing frameworks for civic engagement and mobilization while hoping to enhance their own legitimacy in the process.<sup>16</sup> Regimes thus insert themselves directly into key political debates in which civil societies have been especially vocal, forcing engagement on controversial issues into official, state-dominated channels, and crowding out or simply repressing independent NGOs working in these spheres. This is most visible in an area where Arab regimes are highly vulnerable to criticism: human rights.

In country after country, governments have appropriated the role of human rights monitor and protector while simultaneously repressing independent human rights organizations. During the 1970s and 1980s, human rights emerged as key focus of civic mobilization across the Arab world; Tunisia was a model in the development of human rights NGOs. The Tunisian Hu-

man Rights League, formed in 1975, three years before the establishment of Helsinki Watch (later Human Rights Watch) is widely regarded as the first Arab human rights NGO. The Tunisian Association for Human Rights was created not long after in 1977. By the early 1990s, however, at the moment in which the Tunisian government was retreating from political liberalization and engaging in widespread repression of civic organizations and opposition movements, it expanded its official role as defender of human rights. In 1991, the government created two new offices, a Special Advisor to the President on Human Rights and the Supreme Authority for Human Rights. Within less than a year, the Tunisian Human Rights League shut down. By the end of the 1990s, Human Rights Watch indicated that in “Tunisia, the government sought not only to present its own version of human rights and democratization but employed repressive and sometimes brutal measures to muzzle Tunisian human rights activists who tried to portray a truer picture.”<sup>17</sup>

Regimes in virtually every Arab state engaged in similar moves. In Algeria, independent human rights organizations emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, followed in the 1990s, during a period of political closure and wrenching social violence, by the establishment of state institutions tasked with overseeing human rights practices. Jordan established the governmental National Center for Human Rights in 2002. In Egypt, unsurprisingly, the appropriation of human rights oversight by the state has led to the proliferation of offices and agencies with overlapping roles, including the Public Administration for Human Rights, established in 2001, and a Human Rights Directorate at the Ministry of the Interior, the agency that oversees some of Egypt’s internal security forces, created in 2005. Yemen’s government hosted an international event in June 2006 called the “Sana’a International Conference on Democracy, Political Reforms and Freedom of Expression.” Though

<sup>16</sup> André Bank, “Rents, Cooptation, and Economized Discourse: Three Dimensions of Political Rule in Jordan, Morocco and Syria,” *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1-2 (2004), pp. 155-79. The author wishes to thank Joshua Stacher for bringing this article to his attention.

<sup>17</sup> Human Rights Watch, *World Report 1999* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999), available at <<http://www.hrw.org/worldreport99/mideast/index.html>>.

sponsored in part by an Italian NGO and the European Union, and including a number of civil society representatives, the final communiqué of the meeting was characterized by NGOs as reflecting a “governmental vision,” rather than NGO views. In Morocco, independent human rights organizations first appeared in the late 1970s. By the early 1990s, however, the monarchy had begun to insert itself directly into human rights issues. A formal Advisory Council on Human Rights was established by King Hassan in 1990; a full-fledged Ministry of Human Rights was established in 1993. If Morocco has moved further than most Arab regimes to address human rights abuses, it has nonetheless juxtaposed the appropriation of human rights oversight as a government function with restrictions on independent groups—even though the Advisory Council, like similar bodies in other Arab states, has included representatives of civil society organizations.

This dual strategy of appropriating civil society while restricting independent civic organizations has produced a distinctive civic landscape in the Arab world. Regimes have retreated from the commanding heights of authoritarianism, repressing more selectively, embracing discourses of human rights and democratization, and opening more space for civic forms of organization than in the past. In some instances, such as Morocco, Jordan, and Yemen there have been substantive gains for society and new possibilities for holding government accountable to citizens. At the same time, however, these civic spaces are contained, regulated, and hemmed in by regimes that combine legalism, coercion, cooptation, and the appropriation of civil society roles

by government to keep civic activism low, NGO sectors fragmented, and civil society organizations weak.

## MANAGING POLITICAL CONTESTATION

In recent years the Arab world has seen growing levels of political competition, increased attention from regimes to issues of electoral reform, and a widespread sense of progress in the liberalization, if not the democratization, of electoral arenas. Egypt, Algeria, Yemen, Jordan and Morocco have all modified electoral laws to improve voter participation, ease restrictions on political competition, and strengthen oversight and administration of elections.<sup>18</sup> In some instances, these reforms have produced real gains. Egypt’s 2005 parliamentary elections resulted in the unexpected victory of 88 candidates associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, the strongest electoral performance of moderate Islamists in the Arab world.<sup>19</sup> In September 2007, Morocco’s main Islamist movement, the Justice and Development Party secured 47 seats in parliamentary elections.<sup>20</sup> Earlier in 2007, King Abdullah ended months of speculation about a delay in parliamentary elections in Jordan by confirming that they would be held on schedule, in the fall of 2007.<sup>21</sup>

Foreign officials have praised regimes for these changes. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice congratulated Jordan in October 2006 for “making really great strides in its political evolution.”<sup>22</sup> A European Union Election Observer Mission characterized the September 2006 elections in Yemen as a “milestone in the democratic development of Yemen.”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Amy Hawthorne, “Political Reform in the Arab World: A New Ferment?” Carnegie Paper No. 52 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2004), available at <<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=15989>>.

<sup>19</sup> Samer Shehata and Joshua Stacher, “The Brotherhood Goes to Parliament,” *Middle East Report*, No. 240 (Fall 2006), available at <[http://www.merip.org/mer/mer240/shehata\\_stacher.html](http://www.merip.org/mer/mer240/shehata_stacher.html)>.

<sup>20</sup> The Justice and Development Party had expected to win up to eighty seats, but fell far short of this goal.

<sup>21</sup> At virtually the same moment that elections were confirmed (and King Abdullah II left Jordan to deliver an address to a joint session of the U.S. Congress), Jordan’s parliament voted to approve a harsh new media law that imposed tough sanctions on journalists found to violate a broad array of restrictions on media coverage of political issues and figures. Note also, that at the time this paper went to press, the Islamic Action Front, the political wing of Jordan’s Muslim Brotherhood, had not confirmed its participation in parliamentary elections. The elections are set for November 20, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Secretary Condoleezza Rice, “Briefing En Route Shannon, Ireland,” October 1, 2006, available at <<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/73397>>.

<sup>23</sup> European Union Election Observer Mission, *Yemen Final Report: Presidential and Local Council Elections* (Brussels: European Commission, September 20, 2006), p.1, available at <[http://ec.europa.eu/external\\_relations/human\\_rights/eu\\_election\\_ass\\_observ/yemen/final\\_report\\_2006\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/human_rights/eu_election_ass_observ/yemen/final_report_2006_en.pdf)>.

As most observers of Arab politics recognize, however, there is less to these changes than meets the eye. Electoral reforms in Arab countries have less to do with democratization than with making elections safe for authoritarianism.<sup>24</sup> Regime management of electoral arenas reflects the double-edged logic of authoritarian upgrading. Reforms permit increased levels of political contestation—and in this sense they cannot be dismissed as meaningless. Yet they also ensure that elections remain tightly managed and operate as substantially uneven playing fields that distort electoral outcomes to the benefit of regimes. As recent elections in Yemen and Egypt showed, regimes combine tolerance for higher levels of electoral competition, including participation by Islamists willing to play within state-defined limits, with tactics designed to ensure that ruling parties continue to dominate electoral outcomes.

The instruments that regimes have adopted to advance these aims are similar to those used to manage and contain civil societies more broadly. Opposition activities and leaders seen as especially threatening become targets of regime coercion and repression, as in the cases of Saad Eddin Ibrahim and Ayman Nour in Egypt—senior opposition figures imprisoned by the government on highly suspect charges. In a number of instances, including Algeria, Egypt, and Syria, countries continue to be governed under emergency security laws that have been in force for decades, exposing opposition activists and parties to charges of subversion, treason, and violation of emergency statutes under systems that provide little transparency or accountability.

In addition, legal frameworks fragment and disorganize political oppositions. They subject opposition

groups to arbitrary regulation, impose obstacles to political party formation and financing, and restrict opposition access to media while regimes sanction media campaigns that demonize opposition figures. These measures are often accompanied by abuse of state authority during elections to repress voter participation (surrounding polling stations with soldiers and police, creating obstacles to voting, or outright attacks by official forces on voters), along with many instances of fraud in the conduct of elections, with vote buying being the most common example.<sup>25</sup>

The most important advantage exploited by regimes, however, is the manner in which, over time, states and ruling parties in the Arab world have become virtually indistinguishable.<sup>26</sup> This phenomenon is pervasive, but is often difficult to detect. Incumbents benefit in countless ways from their capacity to exploit the full scope of state resources and personnel on their own behalf—and not only in the distribution of pork and patronage, but also in the conduct and oversight of elections. The visible expression of this advantage may appear innocuous: in Yemen's 2006 elections, soldiers plastered their weapons, jeeps, and clothing with photographs of the president while guarding polling stations. More often, however, it is both explicit and ominous. Election commissions are stacked with regime supporters; election judges and monitors are often partisan, as well. Investigation of complaints about bias and abuse receive unequal treatment. Vote counts are overseen by officials who owe their positions to the ruling party. Regions or districts that are known to favor opposition candidates are more heavily policed than others. And so on. In countless ways both large and small regimes have exploited their control of the state to stack the deck—legally and otherwise—against opposition parties.

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<sup>24</sup> Marsha Pripstein-Posusney, "Behind the Ballot Box: Electoral Engineering in the Arab World," *Middle East Report*, No. 209 (Winter 1998), available at <<http://www.merip.org/mer/mer209/marsha.htm>>.

<sup>25</sup> According to international observers, the going rate for a vote in the 2006 Yemeni elections was about 1,000 Yemeni Riyals, or \$5.

<sup>26</sup> The appropriation of state institutions and resources by a dominant party is a feature common to many authoritarian regimes. See Thomas Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2002), pp. 5-21. Barbara Geddes' assessment of the "Third Wave" reinforces the point: in some instances, "well-entrenched incumbents have so many advantages with regard to control of state resources and the media that the lifting of restrictions on [political] competition may not create a level playing field." Barbara Geddes, "What Do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years?" *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 2, June 1999, p. 116, available at <<http://arjournals.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev.polisci.2.1.115>> (subscription required).



Interestingly, ruling parties have also embraced the technological apparatus associated with elections in established democracies. High-tech “war rooms,” a term that has been imported in English into the political vernacular in places like Egypt, have been established by the technocratic cadres of ruling parties in recent elections in both Egypt and Yemen. In the Egyptian case, the “war room” became the base for massive efforts to identify likely voters, track voter turnout, conduct survey research and focus groups, amass photographs of polling stations throughout the voting to monitor traffic at the polls, and other practices associated with state-of-the-art election management.<sup>27</sup> Whether these efforts connect to the actual experience of electoral politics, however, seems doubtful.

As these examples illustrate, in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Yemen, regimes have moved gradually, and less by design than through *ad hoc* adjustments, to accommodate external and internal pressure, towards top-down and controlled strategies for managing political contestation. These permit more limited and selective use of repression, establish regimes as at least partly responsive to demands for the expansion of political participation, and diffuse criticism of slow progress on political reform. Such changes preserve, if not enhance, regime capacity to control the levers of political power. Moreover, these hybrid approaches to contestation pose a significant dilemma for opposition parties and activists: whether or not to participate in elections knowing that the political game is largely fixed. For many opposition activists, however, the benefits of campaigning, the chance to raise issues and establish reputations (at home and, no less important, among the democracy promotion community abroad) justify participation despite its limits and risks. Similarly, for Islamists electoral par-

ticipation allows them to demonstrate a willingness to play by the rules of the electoral game. Whether this will continue, however, remains an open question. The failure of elections to produce meaningful shifts in the distribution of political power is visibly eroding public confidence in and support for electoral politics.<sup>28</sup>

Even as the space for contestation expands, therefore, electoral outcomes reinforce the *status quo*. The results are at once visible and deeply entrenched. In Yemen, election observers from the European Union concluded that “the fairness of the campaign was undermined by the systemic and exclusive use of State resources to favour the incumbent. State agencies, especially the police and military, showed overwhelming support for President Saleh and the ruling party. The SCER [Supreme Commission for Elections and Referendum] took no action to enforce legal provisions that prohibit such conduct.”<sup>29</sup> In Egypt, according to the International Crisis Group, “Egypt’s first multi-candidate presidential election [in 2005], a response to U.S. pressure, was a false start for reform. . . . The conditions for a genuinely contested presidential election simply did not exist.”<sup>30</sup> Concerning Morocco, Democracy Reporting International noted that:

The election system favours the fragmentation of the political landscape and representation in Parliament, preventing the emergence of any significant political force that could more forcefully promote an extension of Parliament’s prerogatives or a better use of its existing powers. . . . The limited role of Parliament in the constitutional architecture and the political context of Morocco reduces the importance of elections for democratisation.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Joshua Stacher, personal communication with the author, April 2007.

<sup>28</sup> In Morocco’s recent elections, some 20 percent of ballots cast were ruined, an exceptionally high rate of spoilage that has been widely read as a reflection of popular disenchantment with elections that do not produce meaningful change.

<sup>29</sup> European Union Election Observer Mission, *op.cit.*, p.2.

<sup>30</sup> International Crisis Group, *Reforming Egypt: In Search of a Strategy*, Middle East Africa Report No. 46, October 4, 2005, available at <<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=3718&l=1>>.

<sup>31</sup> Democracy Reporting International, *Assessment of the Electoral Framework of Morocco* (Berlin: Democracy Reporting International, January 24, 2007), available at <[http://www.democracy-reporting.org/downloads/report\\_summary.pdf](http://www.democracy-reporting.org/downloads/report_summary.pdf)>.

Not all regimes have adopted these strategies to the same degree. Among the most repressive regimes, including Syria and Tunisia, electoral contests continue to function as empty exercises in political symbolism. In 2004 Tunisia's President Zine El Abidine Bin Ali made clear that the practice of Arab leaders producing comically-outsized electoral victories is alive and well when he claimed some 94.5 percent of the votes with virtually 100 percent turnout. This number was, however, a notable decline from the 99 percent he had received in 1999. It was also less than the 98 percent that Bashar al-Asad received in a national referendum in 2000 when he succeeded his late father as president of Syria and the 97.6 percent vote in his favor in a similar 2007 referendum.

For the most part, however, upgrading suggests that these outsized margins will become a thing of the past. In much of the Arab world new strategies for managing political contestation permit levels of opposition activity that would have seemed intolerable a decade ago. Thus, recent presidential elections in Egypt and Yemen did not produce the 99 percent victory for incumbents that have made Arab elections the subject of widespread derision. Rather, as in the case of Yemen's President Ali Abdullah Saleh, a victory of 77 percent was more than adequate to preserve his regime's grip on power. For regime opponents, however, 77 is the new 99: true democratic breakthroughs remain as distant a possibility in the Arab world today as they were two decades ago.

### CAPTURING THE BENEFITS OF SELECTIVE ECONOMIC REFORMS

Over the past two decades markets have made significant inroads across the Middle East, far outpacing the progress of political reform. Even in countries where

states remain prominent economic actors and public sectors provide regime patronage and political support, private sectors are receiving encouragement from governments anxious to improve economic performance and spur the creation of new jobs. Although populism remains alive and well in much of the Arab world, at least rhetorically, economic reforms have opened the door to foreign investment and trade. Governments offer incentives for exporters and are moving toward more flexible labor markets. They are seeking membership in international institutions such as the World Trade Organization, and participate in efforts supported by international financial institutions to strengthen systems of economic governance.

These shifts in public policy are increasingly visible in the daily lives of Arab citizens, especially those with the resources to take advantage of economic openness. Across the Arab world, public space has been transformed by the region's growing connection to global markets. There are dozens of upscale coffee shops popping up in Cairo that offer free wireless internet access to laptop toting students and businessmen, as do the local McDonalds outlets.<sup>32</sup> There is a proliferation of American-style multi-story shopping malls complete with multiplex cinemas, stores selling high-end luxury goods and the latest in high-technology gadgetry.<sup>33</sup> These trends are evident even among the region's economic reform laggards such as Syria. On a busy street corner in the upscale Abu Roumaneh neighborhood of Damascus the staff at a bustling Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise invite diners to "upsized," their "combo" meals. Nearby, a massive billboard for Benetton looms over Toscana, a popular destination for young affluent Damascenes who puff on water pipes and chat on cell phones until the early hours of the morning, not concerned about spending on dinner as much as some Syrians earn in a week.

<sup>32</sup> Diane Singerman and Paul Amar, eds., *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture and Urban Space in the New Middle East* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2006).

<sup>33</sup> Large American-style shopping malls have long been present in Saudi Arabia and in the other Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf. In recent years they have spread to Amman, Cairo, Beirut, Aqaba. One will open in 2008 in Aleppo in Syria.

In this domain as well, however, regime strategies reflect an explicitly political logic, and take a common form, one not limited to the Middle East. Across the region selective processes of economic liberalization provide enhanced economic opportunities for regime supporters, reinforce the social base of authoritarian regimes, and mitigate pressures for comprehensive economic and social reforms.<sup>34</sup>

Alongside limited but nonetheless meaningful improvements in some economic indicators, selective reforms have provided governments in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Syria, and Tunisia with the resources needed to sustain systems of rule that continue to rely heavily on patronage networks. These selective changes also secure the privileged position of military-industrial establishments that have become large-scale economic actors. Limited reforms also co-opt important segments of the private sector that strongly support selective processes of economic liberalization. These strategies permit politically-connected businessmen and their political counterparts within the bureaucracy to enrich themselves but do not provide for the broad-gauged transparency, accountability, or true democratization of access to economic opportunity that might accompany comprehensive strategies of economic reform.<sup>35</sup>

Evidence of these strategies can be found throughout the Middle East and North Africa. They are visible in the privatization of state-owned enterprises, especially in the sale of state-owned enterprises in such lucrative and fast-growing sectors as telecoms. In Syria,

for example, the decision to award a license to run the country's first private telecoms company, Syriatel, was a barely concealed exercise in high-end patronage politics: some 55 percent of the company's shares are held by Rami Makhoul, the cousin of President Bashar al-Asad. As one indicator of the scale of this business, in June 2006 Makhoul announced that Syriatel's tax payments alone represented 1.7 percent of Syria's GDP.<sup>36</sup> In the Jordanian case, privatization of the telecommunications sector provoked stiff competition among competing networks of business élites, political élites, and international partners. In the end, the initial license went to a consortium that included "former chief of staff and chief of police Abd al-Hadi al-Majali and his son Sahil, the London-based Iraqi investor Nathmi Awji, and the Abu Jaber business family; the foreign partner of the consortium was the American Motorola company."<sup>37</sup>

In Egypt, one of the largest of the country's early privatization episodes concerned the sale of the state-owned Coca Cola bottling plant, which went to Mohamed Nasseir, a close ally of powerful political élites including the prime minister at the time, Atef Sidqi, and future prime minister Atef Ebeid. "After all," Sfakianakis notes, "Nasseir and the rest of the crony business élite were only doing what the structure of the economy had allowed them to do: provide politically helpful services to the regime."<sup>38</sup>

Beyond these high profile instances of privatization, regimes are also able to exploit economic liberalization with less public but equally important regulatory re-

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<sup>34</sup> This view of the political uses of economic reform by authoritarian regimes runs directly counter to the claims of Geddes and other scholars of authoritarianism and democratization that "various economic reforms were cutting profit opportunities out from under rent seekers all of over the world." Geddes, *op. cit.*, p. 139. A set of case studies detailing the persistence of pre-reform rent seeking networks during and after the introduction of reform programs can be found in Steven Heydemann, (ed.), *Networks of Privilege in the Middle East: The Politics of Economic Reform Revisited* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

<sup>35</sup> John Sfakianakis, "The Whales of the Nile: Networks, Businessmen, and Bureaucrats During the Era of Privatization in Egypt," in Heydemann (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 77-100.

<sup>36</sup> Joshua Landis, "Could Syria's GDP Growth be 5.5%?!", *SyriaComment.com*, June 4, 2006, available at <<http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/2006/06/could-syrias-gdp-growth-be-55.htm>>.

<sup>37</sup> Oliver Wils, "From Negotiation to Rent Seeking and Back? Patterns of State-Business Interaction and Fiscal Policy Reform in Jordan," in Heydemann (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 150. Nathmi Awji is probably the British-Iraqi investor, Nadhmi Auch.

<sup>38</sup> Sfakianakis, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

forms such as tariff liberalization, the imposition of an income tax, or banking sector reform. The general pattern is for formal regulatory changes—tax, fiscal, and trade reforms being among the most common—to provide opportunities for regime officials and business élites to renegotiate rent-seeking arrangements. They are able to do this through for example the arbitrary award of exemptions from tax and customs duties, or other forms of privileged treatment over which regime officials possess considerable discretion.

These reforms cement longstanding alliances between key business élites and regimes. Yet they also generate less well-publicized but equally important spill-over benefits that enhance the standing of regimes among much larger segments of Arab societies. These include the opportunities such reforms provide to larger networks of business actors that circulate on the margins of the leading business families and their political allies. Though less visible, these larger networks are no less important politically. If small-scale manufacturers, traders, and retailers benefit far less from selective reforms than do their more influential counterparts, they are nonetheless significant constituencies for authoritarian regimes that continue to claim a role as defenders of the economic interests of workers and the middle class.

In this sense, selective liberalization reflects the broader dynamics of authoritarian upgrading: Arab regimes appropriate and exploit economic policies that are often seen as inimical to authoritarianism because they are able to use these instruments to reinforce their hold on political power. For governments, the political benefits of selective liberalization are particularly important. Regime élites and their allies use their political privileges to capture the resources generated by economic openings. Incumbents manage access to economic opportunities as a political resource, rewarding

friends and penalizing adversaries. Selective economic reforms generate the essential economic resources upon which processes of authoritarian upgrading depend. They also provide the basis for expanding the social coalitions that help to stabilize regimes politically, providing incentives that bind private sector actors to élite counterparts in government and the bureaucracy.

Moreover, economic reform programs and the international relationships that develop to manage them offer an additional arena in which regime élites exploit their privileged access to international institutions, expertise, and resources. They can thereby enhance their domestic standing, and use these international links to insert their allies and clients into positions of international influence and visibility. In some instances, hundreds of millions of dollars are at stake.<sup>39</sup> Large-scale projects aimed at reforming higher education sectors across the Middle East and North Africa, the modernization of core infrastructure such as the Cairo Airport project, and similar activities in public services, health care, and other fields are used instrumentally by regimes as potent political assets. These activities are not the object of political competition, political capture, or predatory rent seeking in a crude sense, although such behavior is unquestionably present. Rather, they express the dual-edged character of authoritarian governance in which processes such as development lending, and the oversight and accountability that typically accompany it, are now seen less as threats to the autonomy of Arab regimes than as instruments for extending and deepening their authority.

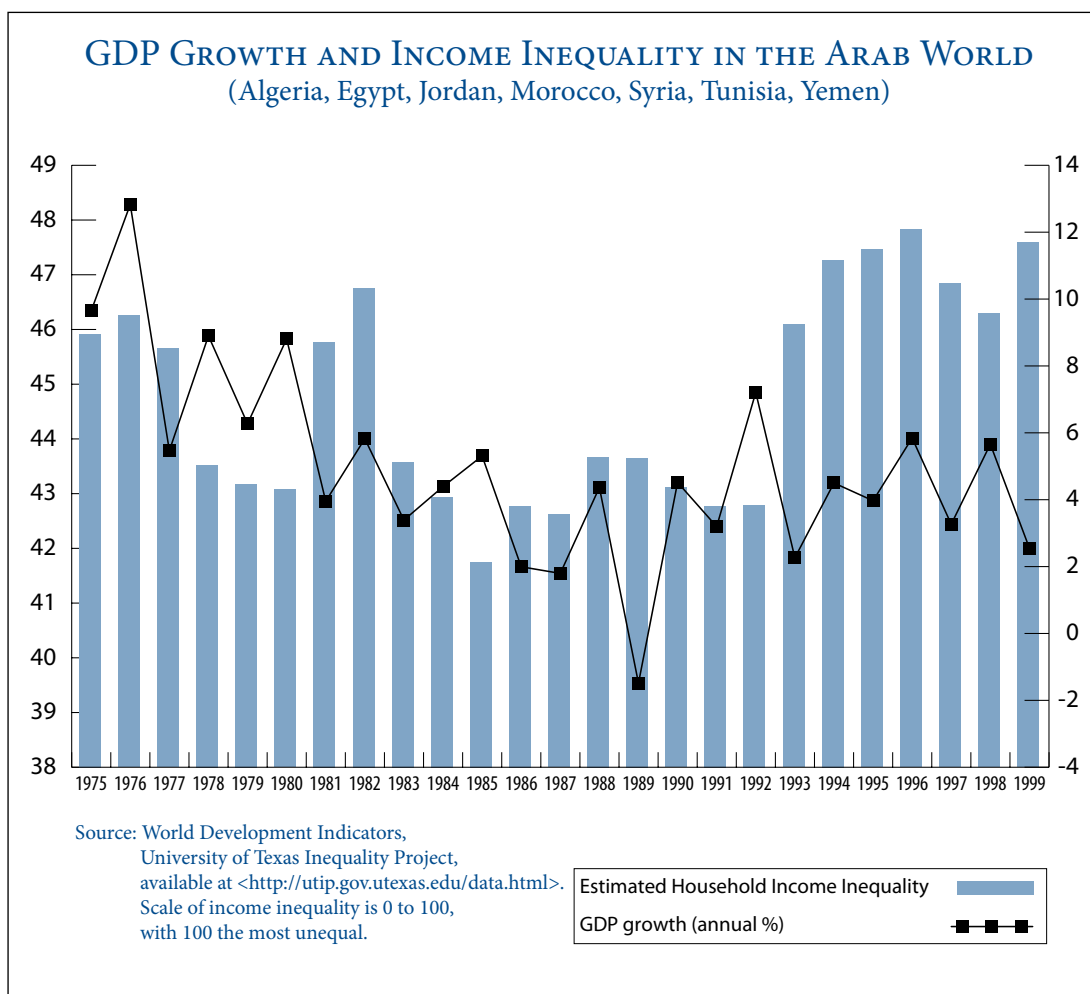
Nonetheless, selective reform programs also carry political risks. They have helped regimes to sustain redistributive programs and subsidies that preserve the support of key constituencies, including labor. Yet social safety nets in the Arab world have substantially frayed in recent decades, and they face increased strain from

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<sup>39</sup> Florian Kohstall, "Policy Transfer, Social Reforms, and the Dynamics of Dynastic Succession in Egypt," paper prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association, Boston, November 2006.

an expanding population of urban poor and growing ranks of unemployed youth—often college-educated children of a downwardly mobile middle class.<sup>40</sup> Improvements in overall economic growth rates are highly uneven and highly volatile. Since 2003, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia have all reformed the basic laws regulating labor markets, increasing the flexibility of employers to hire and fire. Unemployment rates have declined in all three countries, as well as in Syria, and private sectors are now outpacing public sectors as sources of job creation.<sup>41</sup> Yet the vast majority of new jobs are in the infor-

mal sector, where few workers have access to social insurance, retirement benefits, or other social protections. The decline in public sector employment is driving some job seekers not into the private sector, but out of the workforce altogether. This trend is especially notable among college-educated women, who have the highest unemployment rates in Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia. Overall, moreover, economic inequality is growing in a region that has long placed a premium on economic equity and distributive justice (see graph “GDP growth and income inequality in the Arab World”).



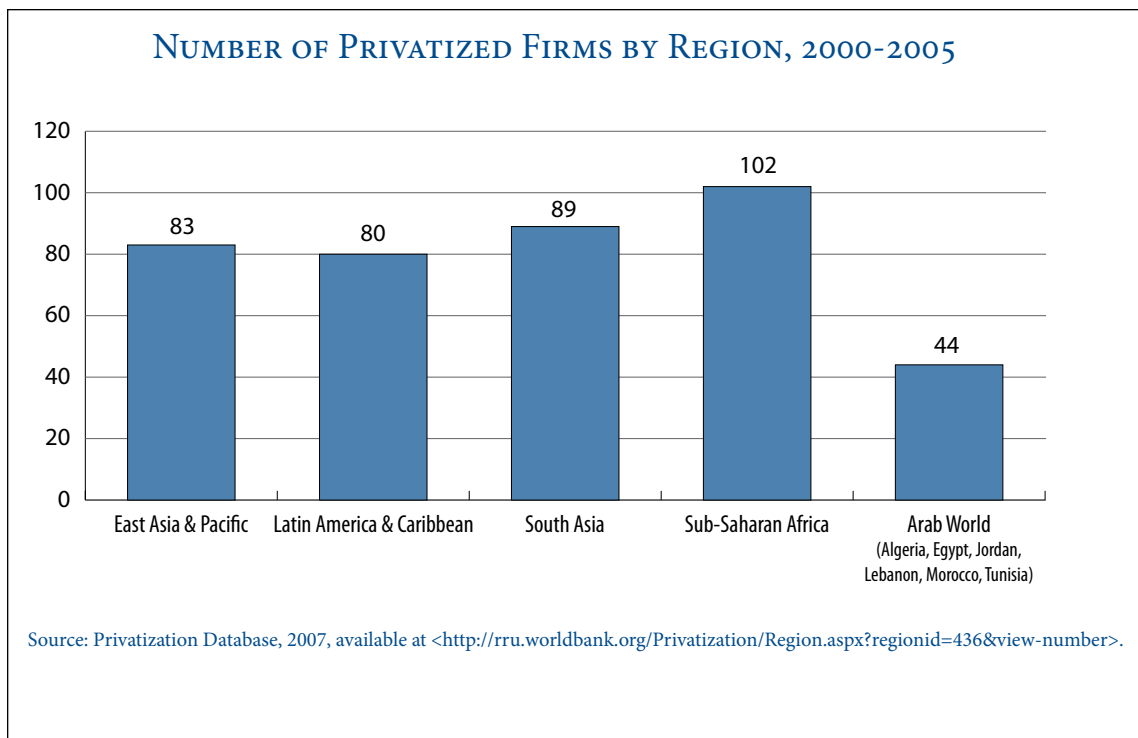
<sup>40</sup> Shana Cohen, *Searching for a Different Future: The Rise of a Global Middle Class in Morocco* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004); Julia Elyachar, *Markets of Dispossession: NGOs, Economic Development and the State in Cairo* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>41</sup> Ragui Assaad, “Employment and Unemployment Dynamics,” paper presented at the Egyptian Labor Market Panel Survey 2006 Dissemination Conference, Cairo, October 30, 2006.

Public sector employment remains desirable, particularly among university graduates, but provides far less protection or security than it did in the past. Indeed, even as public sectors remain useful for regime patronage (and continue to represent an important share of new job creation), they are home to an organized labor elite that could become a significant source of opposition if its position and privileges are threatened. Despite the close links between regimes and organized labor, and strict controls across the Arab world on the right to strike, recent outbreaks of grassroots labor militancy in Egypt's unionized textile sector underscore the political costs associated with economic liberalization and deepening inequality.<sup>42</sup> These costs also help to explain why the Middle East has undergone less privatization than any other region in the world (see graph "Number of Privatized Firms by Region, 2000-5").

For institutions such as the World Bank, these conditions underscore the need to move from selective to comprehensive strategies of economic reform, strengthen accountability and governance, and put in place new social contracts for managing state-labor relations.<sup>43</sup> Arab regimes, however, have drawn the opposite conclusion. They perceive powerful political incentives in preserving selective reforms, retaining the capacity to control and regulate markets, and maintaining the hybrid, selectively reformed economies emerging across the Arab world. Arab incumbents have thus adapted to shifts in the global economy and to pressure for economic liberalization in ways that the advocates of economic reform have yet to recognize.

For almost two decades before 9/11, U.S. policymakers and others argued that the road to democracy in



<sup>42</sup> Some 20,000 textile workers at the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company, a large-scale public enterprise, took part in protests sparked by salary concerns in December 2006. Joel Beinin and Hossam el-Hamalawy, "Egyptian Textile Workers Confront the New Economic Order," *Middle East Reports Online*, March 25, 2007, available at <<http://www.merip.org/mero/mero032507.html>>.

<sup>43</sup> The World Bank, *Unlocking the Employment Potential in the Middle East and North Africa: Toward a New Social Contract* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2003); The World Bank, *Better Governance for Development in the Middle East and North Africa: Enhancing Inclusiveness and Accountability* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2003).

the Arab world ran through economic reforms that would spur growth, create jobs, and mitigate the social conditions felt to promote extremism, and create the conditions necessary for advancing political liberalization. A “markets first, democracy later” approach became the cornerstone of U.S. policies toward the Arab world in the early 1990s, when experiments in “dual reform” ended in an Islamist upsurge in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia. Leading scholars of democracy promotion continue to advocate the use of economic reforms such as privatization as way to reshape “how power is distributed in a society,” and “how ruling political forces” can be shaken loose from entrenched positions.<sup>44</sup>

However, Arab regimes have become adept at appropriating and exploiting processes of economic reform, and of integrating market-based notions of economic development, as well as broader engagement with global markets and international financial institutions, into authoritarian strategies of governance. The results have indeed mitigated pressure for political change, especially among those segments of Arab society, such as youth in Cairo, Amman, or Casablanca, that have far easier access than their parents could have imagined to globalized lifestyles that approximate those of their peers in the United States and Western Europe.

Regimes have thereby reaped the social and political benefits of selective economic reform and retained their control over politically sensitive economic sectors while forestalling indefinitely the political openings that such reforms were expected to foster. Nor did this dynamic change appreciably with the shift in U.S. policy after 2003 when the Bush Administration intensified its focus on democratization in the Arab world. Today, with the failure of U.S. policy in Iraq and issues of stability once

again framing U.S. engagement with Arab governments, the capacity of regimes to sustain strategies of selective economic reform as a key element of authoritarian upgrading faces few meaningful challenges.

## CONTROLLING NEW COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGIES

In upscale neighborhoods in Damascus, internet cafés dot almost every block. Juice bars and cafés offer their customers wireless access with their fruit smoothies or cappuccinos. In neighboring Jordan, Yarmouk University in Irbid is home to more than 130 on-campus internet sites, and nearby Shafiq Street claims to be home to more internet cafés than any other single street in the Middle East. In Cairo, new coffee house chains with names like Beano and Cilantro provide free broadband wireless access to students versed in technology, as do local McDonalds franchises. In all of these settings, customers reflect a diverse cross-section of contemporary Arab society, including women in head-scarves and blue jeans, couples, young men, and families. Arabic-language websites are growing at an astonishing rate, with more than 10,000 registered in Morocco alone as of 2006. Opposition figures such as Nadia Yassine, daughter of the founder of the Islamist party *al-Adl wal-Ihsan* (Justice and Spirituality), use the web to circumvent official censorship. Underscoring her intent to reach as many readers as possible, Yassine’s site is available in four languages, Arabic, English, French, and Spanish.<sup>45</sup> According to the Initiative For an Open Arab Internet (run by the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information), Egypt also boasts some 1,293 “public information technology clubs” neatly merging new communications technologies with long-established forms of civic association.<sup>46</sup> Even if absolute numbers of Arab internet users remain low in global terms,

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<sup>44</sup> Carothers, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

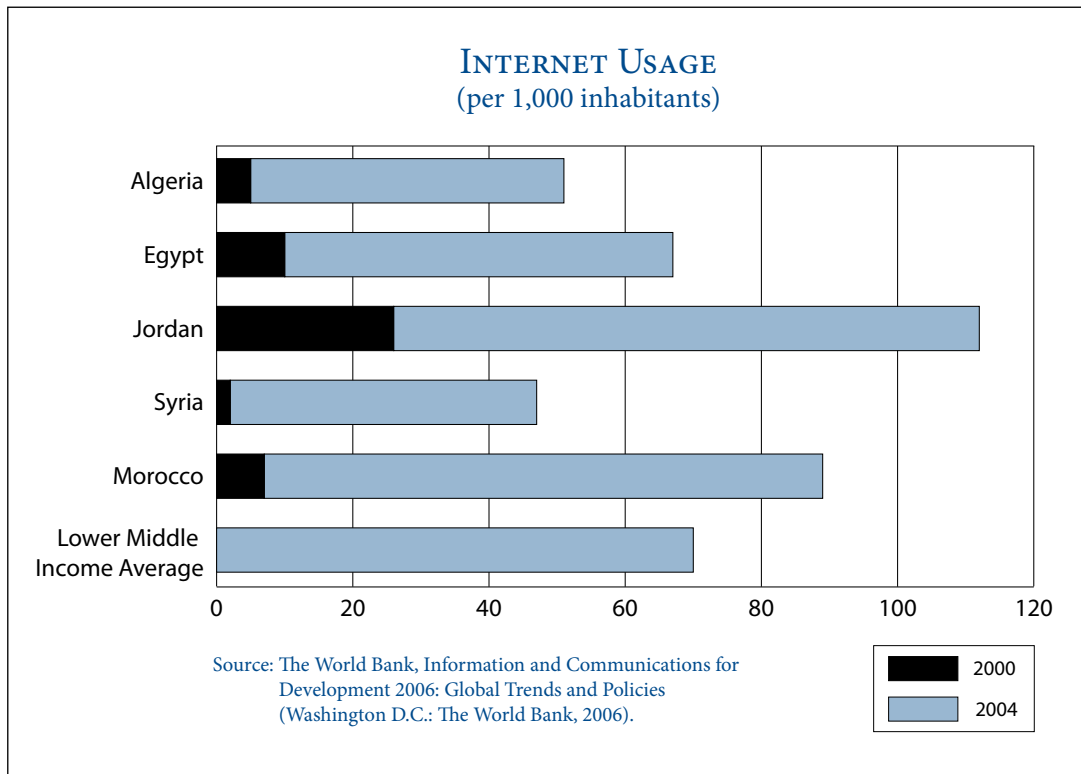
<sup>45</sup> Nadia Yassine’s website is available at <<http://www.nadiayassine.net/>>.

<sup>46</sup> The Initiative For an Open Arab Internet, *Egypt*, n.d., available at <<http://www.openarab.net/en/reports/net2006/egypt.shtml>>.

their numbers are increasing with dizzying speed.<sup>47</sup> Blogging is also increasingly popular and provides political activists with new possibilities for reaching wider publics.<sup>48</sup>

In addition, growth trends in internet usage combine with other shifts in the region's media and telecoms landscape. From Morocco to Yemen urban skylines bristle with satellite dishes. Arab satellite channels compete for audiences with programming that routinely provokes dire rumblings from governments. Mobile telephones have also become pervasive, with tens of millions of Arab citizens "going mobile" in the Middle East and North Africa region in the last five years.

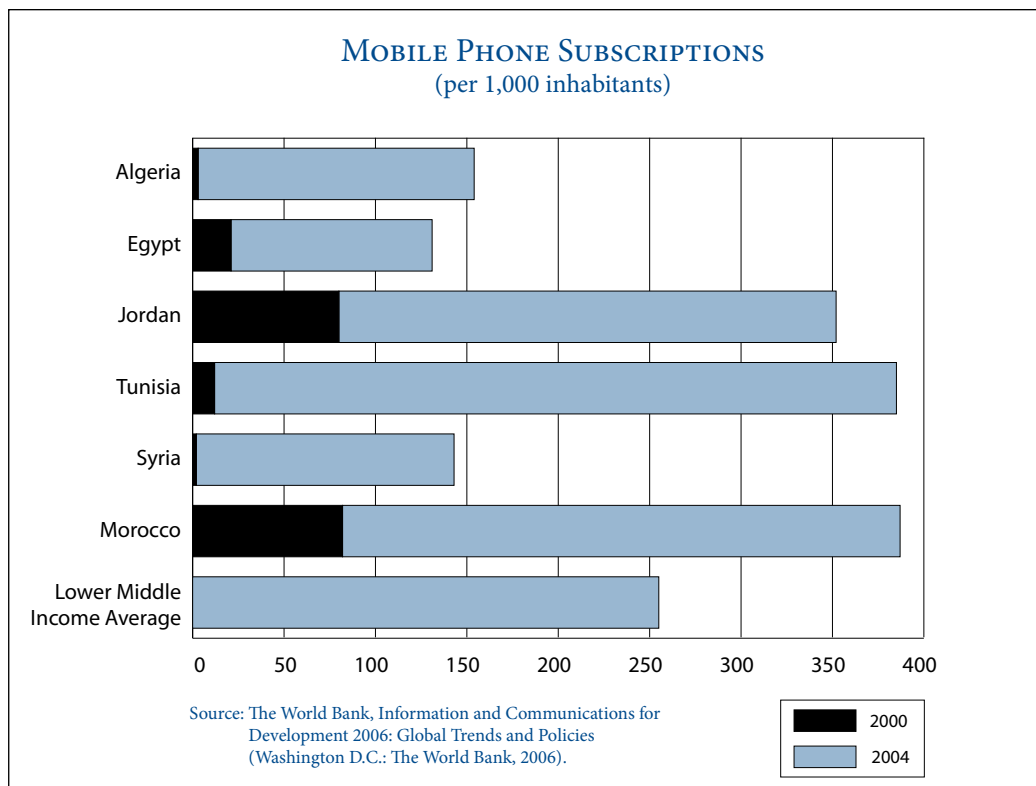
This dramatic growth in access to media, telecommunications technologies, and the internet is among the most significant and tangible changes of recent decades. Compared to even the relatively recent past, when Arab media were marked by a stultifying, obsequious focus on political leaders, limited and poorly-produced state-approved programming, heavy-handed censorship, outmoded technologies, and tightly regulated access to the outside world, the Arab region has at last begun to experience the media and communications revolutions that for many are emblematic of what it means to be modern. Without question, literate Arab citizens today are more connected to global media flows and have better access to information about their own countries and the world than any previous generation.



<sup>47</sup> Although the regional average for internet usage also remains low, at only 10 percent of the region's population, the growth rate of internet usage in the Middle East and North Africa is among the world's fastest: between 2000 and 2007 usage increased almost 500 percent, more than twice the rate of increase in the rest of the world. See Internet World Stats, *Internet Usage in the Middle East (Middle East Internet Usage & Population Statistics)*, 2007, available at <<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm>>.

<sup>48</sup> Marc Lynch, "Blogging the New Arab Public," *Arab Media & Society* (February 2007), available at <<http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=10>>. *The Economist* suggests that Egyptian bloggers have adopted a new term for themselves: *pyjamahideen*—dissidents who blog from home wearing the global uniform of cyber-commuters, pyjamas. *The Economist*, "Egypt: Bloggers may be the Real Opposition," April 14, 2007, p. 54, available at <[http://www.economist.com/world/africa/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=9010890](http://www.economist.com/world/africa/displaystory.cfm?story_id=9010890)>. With respect to the growth of political blogs in Iran, see Bill Berkeley, "Bloggers vs. Mullahs: How the Internet Roils Iran," *World Policy Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Spring 2006), pp. 71-8, available at <<http://www.worldpolicy.org/journal/articles/wpj06-2/Berkeley.pdf>>.





For regimes, however, these changes pose a distinctive and daunting set of challenges. On the one hand, they generate substantial social and political benefits. Projects of technological modernization create a sense among Arab publics of progress and of societies emerging from years of repressive insularity. They permit regimes to present themselves domestically and internationally as promoters of technological innovation and openness, less defensive and rigid in their styles of governance than their predecessors, and more accepting of the social and political changes that the internet seems to symbolize. Nor are political élites shy about exploiting these impressions. Across the region, a new generation of presidents and kings stress their openness to new media and their embrace of the internet. Jordan's King Abdullah II frequently affirms his commitment to freedom of expression, including during a

high-profile visit to Washington in 2005. The official curriculum vitae of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad highlights his role as former Chairman of the Syrian Computer Society. Gamal Mubarak, the son and possible successor to his father, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, is equally eager to associate himself with the modernization of Egypt's communications infrastructure and the spread of new information technologies.

On the other hand, new communications technologies pose significant risks. They have the potential to weaken official control over information, erode the ability of regimes to dominate media space and define media content.<sup>49</sup> The internet in particular provides spaces in which oppositions can mobilize, and governments in the region routinely voice concerns about the use of the internet by militant Islamists—concerns that are

<sup>49</sup> This remains the case even if we acknowledge that the potential of new communications technologies to challenge authoritarian rule is more limited than was often claimed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. See Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor Boas, *Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule* (Washington, D.C.; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003).

just as routinely used to justify tight controls on internet access and use.<sup>50</sup> In addition, new technologies strain the capacity of internal security agencies which as a rule tend to lag in their technological capacity and competence. New media contexts push Arab politicians towards unfamiliar and typically unwelcome terrain, forcing them to justify policies, defend government actions, and respond to public grievances on terms and in settings they are unable to control.

To balance these pressures, Arab regimes are converging on strategies to control and manage public access to new communications technologies along lines that reflect broader patterns of authoritarian upgrading. Governments now accept, however reluctantly, the spread of new communications and media technologies. Arab leaders value the political and reputational gains associated with their self-proclaimed roles as champions of innovation. They also recognize the value of these technologies as steam valves: outlets that mitigate social pressures that might otherwise become politicized. At the same time, virtually every Arab regime has built up extensive systems of regulation, surveillance, oversight, and coercion that vastly limit the autonomy and privacy of users.<sup>51</sup>

Typically, these systems begin with centralized control of access to internet sites, with close attention to sites that carry political content but also pornography or other material deemed, for whatever reason, to be “inconsistent with the religious, cultural, political and moral values” of a country.<sup>52</sup> Controls also include regulations requiring ministerial approval for opening an internet café; requirements that internet service providers report the names of subscribers to government agencies; holding owners of internet cafés legally liable for their customers’ actions; holding website owners

liable for the content of their sites; inspections and monitoring of internet usage by ministry personnel, internal security personnel, or the police; and systems requiring individual users to register for permission to establish internet access accounts from their homes.

In Jordan, for example, state regulations stipulate that internet stations in cafés be open to public view, not enclosed in booths. In Tunisia, the Ministry of Communications Technology, via the Agence Tunisienne d’Internet (ATI, Tunisian Internet Agency), controls all internet infrastructure, and all internet service providers are required to provide the ATI with lists of subscribers on a monthly basis. Café owners are required to post regulations governing internet use publicly in their cafés, and are held accountable for violations by customers. A study by Human Rights Watch of online censorship in the Arab world recorded the text that café owners are legally required to post: “Opening disk drives is strictly forbidden. Do not touch the parameters of the configurations. It is forbidden to access prohibited sites. Thank you.”<sup>53</sup> A report on internet filtering in Tunisia by the OpenNet Initiative noted that “the Tunisian state clearly views the Internet as a powerful social and economic force and has invested in telecommunications infrastructure and passed modern telecommunications legislation.” However, the report then observed that:

The state employs the SmartFilter software, produced by the U.S. company Secure Computing, to target and prevent access to four types of material in particular: political opposition to the ruling government, sites on human rights in Tunisia, tools that enable users to circumvent these controls, and pages containing pornography or other sexually explicit content. . . . Tunisia has deployed the In-

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<sup>50</sup> Gamal Eid, “Arab Activists and Information Technology: The Internet: Glimmer of Light in Dark Tunnel,” (sic) paper presented to the Forum, “Mundos Arabes: Ideas, Players, Spaces,” Madrid, Casa Arabe, January 2007 available at <<http://www.openarab.net/en/articles/2007/art0121.shtml>>.

<sup>51</sup> The Initiative For an Open Arab Internet, *Implacable Enemies: Arab Governments and the Internet*, December 2006, available at <<http://www.openarab.net/en/reports/>>.

<sup>52</sup> This is the language used by the United Arab Emirates to alert users that an internet site they have requested has been blocked.

<sup>53</sup> Human Rights Watch, *False Freedom: Online Censorship in the Middle East and North Africa*, Vol. 17, No. 10(E) (Washington, D.C.: Human Rights Watch, November 2005), p. 2, available at <<http://hrw.org/reports/2005/mena1105/>>.

ternet in a way that implements a multi-layered architecture of control. All of the state's Internet Service Providers (ISPs) purchase access from Tunisia's Internet Agency, which performs filtering at the network backbone. This ensures greater consistency of control. In addition, the primary means of going on-line for Tunisians are the "Publinets" - Internet cafés that are required by the state to monitor users' access to prevent them from obtaining prohibited materials.<sup>54</sup>

Similar systems have been adopted in other Arab countries. Moreover, as home-based internet access expands, regimes are putting controls in place to monitor individual account holders. In Syria, those who wish to subscribe to an internet service provider (state-controlled, of course) are required to fill out an application containing not only names and extensive personal information, but also their user names and passwords.<sup>55</sup> As text-messaging grows in importance, regimes are honing their ability to monitor and censor this means of communication, as well. It is entirely likely that within the next year the use of text messages to mobilize participants in political rallies—a technique used by leaders of the *Kifaya* (Enough!) movement in Egypt among others—will no longer be possible.

Lurking not so far away in the background is the continuing reliance of Arab regimes on repression and violence to enforce restrictions on use of the internet and on other media. Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Syria have all arrested and imprisoned individuals for violation of laws governing internet use. In many instances charges include violations of state security laws. Cases

are adjudicated, as in Syria, by powerful and largely unaccountable State Security Courts established when emergency laws were first put into effect several decades ago.

When they feel sufficiently threatened, moreover, regimes have not hesitated to resort to violence against those who use new communications technologies to challenge their authority, and to do so in the most public of ways. An especially glaring instance of this was Tunisia's performance as host of the second World Summit on the Information Society in November 2005. The United Nations chose to hold this prominent international forum in Tunisia despite the country's record of repressing freedom of expression on the internet and in the media more broadly. According to Amnesty International, the decision was intended to "prompt the Tunisian government to allow greater freedom and relax its controls on free speech and peaceful association." In the event, as Amnesty International noted, "this has not occurred."<sup>56</sup> Before the summit, international human rights organizations circulated reports on internet censorship in Tunisia, the number and scope of banned sites, and the unlawful arrest, torture, and detention of individual internet users. Reporters Without Borders included Tunisia on a list of the ten most repressive regimes with respect to internet censorship. During the summit itself, Tunisian activists were physically harassed and prevented from attending sessions with Western counterparts. Internal security agents maintained a visible presence. Several reports of beatings and physical intimidation of participants appeared in the Western press. Unsurprisingly, the United Nations' World Summit on the Information Society website contains no reference to these events.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> The OpenNet Initiative, *Internet Filtering in Tunisia in 2005: A Country Study*, 2005, available at <<http://www.opennetinitiative.net/studies/tunisia/>>. Secure Computing trumpets the exhaustive database it provides to clients who purchase SmartFilter ("the web you want, the control you need"), which includes among its seventy categories of Uniform Resource Locators that can be blocked with the click of a key websites that include content relating to: Government and Military, Education and Reference, General News, Nonprofit Organizations and Advocacy Groups, Politics and Opinion, and Religion and Ideology.

<sup>55</sup> Human Rights Watch, *False Freedom*, op. cit., p. 75.

<sup>56</sup> Amnesty International, "Tunisia: Human rights abuses in the run up to the WSIS," AI Index: MDE 30/019/2005, November 14, 2005, available at <<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE300192005>>.

<sup>57</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and the International Telecommunication Union, *The World Summit on the Information Society*, 2006, available at <<http://www.itu.int/wsis/tunis/index.html>>.

In broad terms, therefore, what has emerged in the Arab world is a hybrid approach to the management of the internet and new media communications technologies that is characteristic of authoritarian upgrading. Regimes have become more open to and accepting of these technologies. They acknowledge their social, political, and economic benefits. Yet they also assimilate these technologies into authoritarian strategies of governance, using them to enhance and upgrade their own capacity to keep tabs on their citizens, and to surround them with a “multi-layered architecture of control.”<sup>58</sup> In addition, and in keeping with upgrading as a regional phenomenon, management of new communications technologies is an area in which regimes learn from each other. Cross-learning and the regional exchange of techniques and strategies among Arab governments have been especially important. Regional and international meetings that bring Arab officials together—sometimes under the auspices of U.S. democracy promotion organizations—provide opportunities for sharing ideas and experiences about strategies for more effectively managing new technologies. There is also evidence of bilateral exchanges between Arab governments for such purposes.<sup>59</sup>

## DIVERSIFYING INTERNATIONAL LINKAGES

Upgrading is evident both in the reorganization of domestic politics but also in Arab regimes’ efforts to diversify their international linkages. Arab governments are establishing diplomatic, trade, and investment relationships to insulate themselves from the pressures exerted by Western states and international institutions

that promote political and economic reform and have demonstrated their willingness to use conditionality to advance reform agendas.<sup>60</sup>

For example, Arab regimes in the Levant and North Africa are seeking out ties with states in Asia, the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf, and elsewhere that are largely indifferent to issues of governance and political reform. They are exploiting the rise of newly competitive markets in foreign aid and development lending to blunt the influence of the World Bank on issues of economic governance. Regimes are using these ties to mobilize international coalitions to undermine Western diplomacy, a trend evident in the effectiveness with which Syria has fended off U.S. and French efforts to isolate it following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005. Such coalitions have long been a feature of Arab diplomacy in such settings as the United Nations. They are now expanding to become core elements in the strategies adopted by Arab regimes to ensure their own persistence in an international system that is increasingly unsympathetic to authoritarianism.

These shifts are especially evident among the Arab monarchies in the Persian Gulf, where oil creates strategic incentives for both Arab exporters and non-Western importers to strengthen relationships. Among the first states that Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah visited after he ascended the throne were China, India, and Malaysia. Yet this shift is also evident among the core Arab states of the Levant and North Africa which have sought out diplomatic, trade, and

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<sup>58</sup> The OpenNet Initiative, op.cit. Secure Computing trumpets the exhaustive database it provides to clients who purchase SmartFilter (“the web you want, the control you need”), which includes among its seventy categories of URLs that can be blocked with the click of a key websites for: Government and Military, Education and Reference, General News, Nonprofit Organizations and Advocacy Groups, Politics and Opinion, and Religion and Ideology.

<sup>59</sup> Information about the use of regional meetings for the informal exchange of ideas among Arab officials on how to upgrade authoritarian governance was provided in an interview with a leading democracy promotion specialist in Washington D.C., November 2006. Information on bilateral exchanges of technical delegations among Arab states to share information on managing internet technologies was provided in a personal interview with a leading political analyst in Damascus, May 2006.

<sup>60</sup> As expressed by Egyptian journalist Ibrahim Nafie, “the good news about China is that it doesn’t have the same historic baggage and political hang-ups about this region as Europe or the US does. So the road to cooperation appears for the moment to be trouble-free.” Ibrahim Nafie, “Regarding China,” *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 8-14 February, 2007, available at <<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2007/831/op1.htm>>.

investment relationships with important non-Western states, most notably China.<sup>61</sup> Top Chinese leaders have encouraged the deepening of these ties. Chinese President Hu Jintao has made repeated visits to the region, including stops in the Persian Gulf, Yemen, and Oman. He also visited Algeria and Egypt, which China has identified as Arab countries of particular importance because of their diplomatic support to the Chinese Communist government at key points in its history.

Beyond these high-level diplomatic visits, China and the Arab states have expanded the organizational frameworks that foster Sino-Arab cooperation on various levels. In December 2001, a ceremony in Beijing attended by Secretary General of the Arab League, Amr Moussa, and senior Chinese officials inaugurated a China-Arab Friendship Association which affirmed non-interference in the internal affairs of members states (“political relations on the basis of mutual respect”) as one of its founding principles. This was followed in September 2004 by the signing of cooperation agreements creating a Sino-Arab Cooperation Forum, which reiterated the principle of relations based on non-interference. Multilateral agreements have been outpaced, however, by an expanding array of bilateral economic agreements between China and Egypt, Syria, Tunisia,<sup>62</sup> and other Arab states. Between 2000 and 2006, bilateral trade between Syria and China increased from about \$100 million to \$1.5 billion, a figure projected to double by 2011. In the summer of 2007 Syria and China signed the latest in a series of trade agreements designed to further expand Chinese investment in the Syrian economy, including

Syria’s formal recognition that China’s economy now meets many World Trade Organization standards.<sup>63</sup> China has also become more active in development lending, promoting the role of its own financial institutions in the Middle East and North Africa such as the Export-Import Bank of China. It has established itself as a major donor presence in North Africa, often adopting practices that undercut Western donors whose funding requires borrowers to meet standards of accountability, transparency, and performance.<sup>64</sup>

China has received significant attention as Arab states diversify international linkages, but it is not alone. India, Malaysia, Russia, Singapore, and Vietnam also figure prominently in this process. In 2006, India was apparently the second largest non-Arab investor in Syria after Iran. In 2007, the Saudi Arabian government agreed to send more than 200 university students to Singapore on paid fellowships. Singapore’s foreign ministry has commented on the improvement in the country’s relations throughout the Arab world including with Egypt, Jordan, and North Africa (where it recently initiated diplomatic relations with Libya). Singapore has also announced the establishment of a major research center focusing on West Asia and North Africa.

In addition, countries like Egypt, Jordan, and Syria have made the Arab monarchies in the Persian Gulf states a key focus of their regional diplomacy as a means of developing alternative sources of investment, trade, and political support. These activities reflect the interest of poorer Arab states in capturing a share of the enormous capital surpluses that have flowed into

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<sup>61</sup> As one analyst put it: “When Chinese President Hu Jintao visited the oil giant Saudi Aramco last year, he didn’t need a translator. Plenty of Chinese-speaking Saudis were on hand. A few years earlier, Saudi Aramco had sent dozens of employees to study in Beijing. After all, China, not the United States, represents the future growth for Saudi oil exports.” Afshin Molavi, “The New Silk Road,” *The Washington Post*, April 9, 2007; p. A13, available <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/08/AR2007040800923.html>>.

<sup>62</sup> Tunisia is the largest recipient of Chinese concessional loans in Africa as of 2006. In June 2004 Tunisia and China signed eight bilateral agreements covering trade and other forms of cooperation.

<sup>63</sup> Oxford Business Group, “Befriending Beijing,” Syria, Vol. 129, July 2, 2007, available at <<http://www.oxfordbusinessgroup.com/weekly01.asp?id=3022>>.

<sup>64</sup> Moses Naim, “Rogue Development Aid,” *International Herald Tribune*, February 15, 2007, available at <<http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/02/15/opinion/ednaim.php>>. Naim also singles out Saudi Arabia and Iran as practitioners of “rogue” lending. To date, Middle Eastern and North African states are relatively small recipients of Chinese aid and loans. Relations have stressed trade and investment over development assistance. However, China has pledged to expand its aid programs in Africa substantially over the coming decade, suggesting the possibility that development lending in Arab North Africa and Egypt will grow, as well.

the Persian Gulf states since 2003. Yet they are also a reflection of the interest of Arab autocrats in building regional relationships that increase their autonomy and strengthen their capacity to resist Western demands for reform. In Syria, large-scale commitments from Persian Gulf investors in the period immediately following the Hariri assassination were interpreted locally not simply as evidence of progress on economic reform, but as an important indicator that Western pressure had not succeeded in constraining Syria's ability to conduct business as usual.<sup>65</sup>

No less important, diversification also reflects an interest among Arab regimes in states that are seen as potential models, examples to be emulated as leaders

explore ways to address pressing problems of economic and social development. China stands out in this regard. It has gained visibility as a developmentally effective, politically stable non-democracy that holds out potentially important lessons for Arab leaders.<sup>66</sup> In contrast to Russia, where the experience of dual reform during the 1990s is seen as deeply destabilizing, China is admired for its managed, top-down approach to economic liberalization without political reform; its attention to political stability and social peace; its capacity to manage communications technologies and the media without apparently sacrificing innovation; and its assertiveness relative to the West. It has come to be seen as a model of successful authoritarian upgrading—and Arab regimes are paying attention.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Joshua Landis, "Investments in Syria? Fighting Isolation by Derhally" (sic), *SyriaComment.com*, October 28, 2005, available at <<http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/2005/10/investments-in-syria-fighting.htm>>.

<sup>66</sup> Ellen Lust-Okar, *op.cit.*

<sup>67</sup> Jafar Kirar Ahmad, "Madkhal illa al-'Alaqa al-Arabiyya al-Siniyya," [An Introduction to Sino-Arab Relations], The Arab Center for Strategic Studies (Damascus), *Monthly Monograph Series*, No. 26, February 2006. Recognizing the potential value of improved Sino-Arab relations, this study also expresses concern about Chinese-Israeli ties as an obstacle to China's efforts to improve relations with Arab states.

## EMERGING PATTERNS IN ARAB GOVERNANCE: THE NORMALIZATION OF ARAB AUTHORITARIANISM

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Collectively, these trends reflect a broad-based process of adaptation and change among Arab regimes. They mark the emergence of new patterns of authoritarian governance that have reduced the vulnerability of Arab governments to pressures for political and economic reform, and equipped them to capture and exploit the gains from economic openness and technological innovation. These trends also make Arab regimes able to mitigate at least some of the social and political pressures associated with the sense of stagnation, vulnerability, and insularity that have long been evident in Arab perceptions of their own circumstances. Upgrading has been effective in part because it has delivered visible, meaningful benefits to Arab societies, even as it reinforces existing regimes. Not least, it has provided the framework through which Arab leaderships have extended and reinforced the social coalitions upon which their regimes depend.

As noted earlier, these new patterns are not a product of planning and foresight on the part of Arab leaders. They are, instead, the result of *ad hoc* and often defensive responses to shifts in the political, economic, and social environment over the past two decades. Nor should their coherence be exaggerated. Regimes differ in the speed with which they have “upgraded,” and the extent to which they combine new-fangled strategies

of governance with older, coercive and personalistic approaches to social, political, and economic control.

Moreover, upgrading has generated problems of its own, including new opportunities for corruption, social polarization, and increased levels of economic inequality. It has fostered the political and social exclusion of significant segments of Arab society for whom the state is notable largely by its absence. In this sense, upgrading has been accompanied, as witnessed in the recent wave of strikes among Egyptian textile workers, by the deepening of social conflicts around questions of social welfare and redistribution that states are increasingly unable to address. To the extent that regimes have been effective in capturing and exploiting the practices and rhetoric of democracy and civil society for their own purposes, upgrading also reinforces a growing cynicism among Arabs, especially Arab youth, about the value of political participation and the possibilities for meaningful political change.

These are significant challenges, and it is not at all clear that upgrading itself offers the tools that Arab governments need to address them. States are unlikely to resume the redistributive role that anchored the populist social pacts of the 1960s to 1980s across the Arab world.<sup>68</sup> In effect, Arab leaders are gambling

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<sup>68</sup> Steven Heydemann, “Social Pacts and the Persistence of Authoritarianism in the Middle East,” in Oliver Schlumberger (ed.), *Debating Arab Authoritarianism: Dynamics and Durability in Non-Democratic Regimes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 21-38.

that the economic and social payoffs of upgrading for some segments of Arab society will exceed the costs that are imposed on those it excludes and marginalizes. Whether this wager will succeed remains to be seen. Yet there can be little question that it is around these issues—social and economic concerns that have not figured prominently in U.S. democracy promotion programs to date—that the United States is likely to find opportunities for advancing political reform.

Authoritarian upgrading has, nonetheless, transformed the political landscape of the Arab world. It not only reflects a higher capacity for innovation and adaptation than Arab governments are often believed to possess, it underscores the extent to which they actively participate in and benefit from the globalization of authoritarian strategies of governance. Arab governments learn from one another, share information and tactics, and draw lessons from the experiences of authoritarian states outside the region as models. As a result, there are not only growing similarities among Arab regimes in their strategies of governance, there is a broader process of convergence underway that is eroding the purported distinctiveness of authoritarianism in the Arab world, a region often depicted as *sui generis* in its resistance to the “Third Wave” of democratization. The practices associated with authoritarian upgrading have narrowed the differences between

Arab regimes and the dozens of other hybrid forms of authoritarianism in other regions—the liberalized autocracies, electoral authoritarian regimes, and illiberal democracies that now populate wide swathes of the post-“Third Wave” global landscape. In this sense, authoritarian upgrading reflects the normalization of Arab authoritarianism and the end of the Middle East’s exceptionalism with respect to democratization and political change.

These trends have significant and deeply troubling implications for those working for democratic change in the Arab world. For many analysts of the region, failures of democratization are used to advance a view of Arab regimes as stagnant, stuck in their ways, and determined to resist changes that threaten them and exceed their control. By contrast, authoritarian upgrading suggests that failures of democratization are not a product of Arab resistance to change but rather of the effectiveness of regimes in adapting to and managing the pressures for change created by democracy promotion. Perhaps most troubling for democratic reformers in the Arab world and their allies, Arab regimes have concluded that the most effective strategy for resolving the economic, political, and social problems that threaten their stability is not democratization, but the upgrading of authoritarian strategies of governance, a strategy that is proving remarkably successful.



## CRACKS IN THE WALL? AUTHORITARIAN UPGRADING AND U.S. DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

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Authoritarian upgrading is transforming the politics and political economies of the Arab world in ways that current democracy promotion debates have not taken into account. At present, the impact of upgrading has been overshadowed by other concerns, from failures of U.S. policy in Iraq to Iran's nuclear ambitions, tensions in Lebanon, and the ongoing stalemate between Israel and the Palestinians. The Iraq experience in particular has undermined U.S. confidence in the desirability of regime change and renewed the appreciation of policymakers for political stability in the Arab world. As Arab analysts have noted, U.S. diplomats, including Secretary of State Rice, have little to say these days on the subject of democracy.<sup>69</sup>

The results have not been helpful for those struggling to find a way to preserve democracy promotion as a U.S. government priority and to develop alternative strategies for engaging Arab regimes on issues of political reform. If the diagnosis presented here is correct, however, the problems that the United States confronts in the Arab world go well beyond, and extend far deeper, than the immediate issues of Iraq, Iran, Syria, Hamas and Hizballah.

Authoritarian upgrading has major implications for how the United States promotes democratic reform

in the Arab world. In effect, regimes have the system gamed. They now exploit for their own authoritarian purposes the democracy promotion strategies that have long been favored by the United States—including strengthening civil society organizations, promoting electoral reform, improving political participation, capacity-building in legislatures and other institutions of governance, economic liberalization measures aimed at increasing transparency, political party development, and opening the region to new information flows. The more U.S. policy continues to rely on these well worn and time tested strategies, the less effective it is likely to be.

The point is not that these U.S. strategies have failed. They have forced authoritarian regimes to adjust, adapt, and reconfigure themselves in response to U.S. and domestic pressures for democratic reform. Yet adjust they have. As a result, current U.S. democracy promotion policies in the Arab world have largely exhausted their value. They may continue to generate modest incremental gains in a few select areas of political, civic, and social life. In the current political climate, modest expectations may be all that can be expected. Furthermore, to the extent that democracy activists within the Arab world benefit from a visible U.S. presence in the promotion of democratic reform,

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<sup>69</sup> See Radwan Ziadeh and Steven Heydemann, "Inhisar al-D'am al-Ameriki lil-Dimuqratiyya [The Decline of American Support for Democratization], *Al-Hayyat*, March 22, 2007.

such strategies can have useful signaling effects. They are unlikely, however, to achieve substantial progress towards the goal of systematic democratic change in the Arab world. Where U.S. policy fits neatly into a broader process of upgrading—giving Arab leaders tools they can manipulate for their own purposes—they may actively undermine prospects for meaningful political change.

What is happening, in other words, is a growing disconnect between the conceptions of authoritarianism that drive U.S. policy, and the strategies of authoritarian governance now emerging in the Arab world. Since the 1980s, the U.S. has made significant investments in the development of civil societies in the Arab world.<sup>70</sup> Reflecting in part a Tocquevillian view of civil societies as carriers of democracy, civic associations and non-profit organizations have been supported as incubators in which democratic norms take root and positive forms of social capital are created.<sup>71</sup> Even today U.S. policy continues to reflect notions of democratization that draw heavily on experience in Eastern Europe and Latin America—including the recent “color revolutions” in the former Soviet Union during which civil society organizations, many funded through U.S. democracy promotion programs, played prominent roles.

These conceptions offer poor starting points, however, in the context of authoritarian upgrading, where Arab regimes have demonstrated their ability to absorb, appropriate, and exploit processes of globalization, technological change, and economic liberalization to restructure and strengthen their grip on political power.

What is needed, instead, is a second generation of democracy promotion policies: democracy promotion 2.0. Two “second generation” strategies stand out as most likely to be effective in advancing democratic reform in the Arab world.

First, authoritarian upgrading offers opportunities for the United States to hold Arab regimes accountable for their commitments to processes such as electoral reform and good governance. The United States can exploit regime strategies designed to contain and manage participation as tools for broadening democratic practice and can transform the cynical use by Arab regimes of democratic rhetoric to develop and apply benchmarks that will determine the quality of U.S. relations with these governments.

Measures to exploit the openings created by upgrading require adjustments in how the United States pursues political reform in the Arab world. The fundamental requirement is especially daunting: the United States should systematically adhere to its own expressed commitments in support of political reform in the Arab world and include a clear mandate to integrate democracy promotion into broader U.S. relationships with Arab governments.<sup>72</sup> It should use benchmarks that provide for a measurable assessment of the progress of Arab governments towards meaningful political reform.

Such a shift would also require the broader use of conditionality in U.S. relations with Arab governments, including guidelines that take into account restrictions they impose on the activities and independence of civil

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<sup>70</sup> Tamara Cofman Wittes and Sarah Yerkes, *What Price Freedom? Assessing the Bush Administration's Freedom Agenda* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2006), available at <<http://www.brookings.edu/fp/saban/analysis/wittes20060901.htm>>.

<sup>71</sup> These policies have been subject to wide-ranging criticism. They are thought to romanticize civil societies and their potential as carriers of democracy; to overlook the absence of democracy within civil society groups in the Arab world; and they fail to address core issues of political power and the need to alter the distribution of political power in Arab societies. Nonetheless, civil society development, often with a focus on particular social groups (women, for instance) remains a leading element of U.S. democracy promotion efforts in the Middle East.

<sup>72</sup> A similar point about European government policies is made by Oliver Schlumberger, “Dancing with Wolves: Dilemmas of Democracy Promotion in Authoritarian Contexts,” in Dietrich Jung (ed.), *Democratization and Development: New Political Strategies for the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), pp. 33-60.

society organizations—among them controls on their access to foreign funding—and on the activities of democracy activists and moderate opposition parties. A recent increase in repressive measures directed against Arab reformers and human rights activists in Egypt and Syria underscores the need for a strong U.S. response to what has widely been described as a backlash against democracy promotion in the Arab world since 2003. Increased use of conditionality is an important step in this direction. This recommendation is not based on a naïve expectation about the effects of conditionality, but on the value to the United States and to Arab reformers in the region of clear U.S. expectations that play a meaningful role in shaping the quality of U.S. relations with Arab governments.

Recent efforts by the U.S. Congress to cut Egypt's foreign assistance in response to concerns about the repression of democracy activists are a useful movement in this direction. This is, however, only one small part of what needs to be done. The more demanding challenge, of identifying meaningful benchmarks and integrating them consistently and coherently into U.S. policies at the country level across government agencies and across issue areas, has proven more elusive. U.S. democracy promotion efforts in the Arab world too often are undermined by inter-agency competition, competing policy priorities, and the skill with which Arab governments exploit these intra-U.S. government tensions to weaken the impact of democratization programs.<sup>73</sup> U.S. diplomatic missions need to improve the effectiveness with which they communicate the importance of democracy promotion programming to local governments and the manner in which they publicly and privately support democracy promotion efforts. U.S. embassies should make explicit the links between progress toward established benchmarks and the overall quality of bilateral relations with the United States. Their efforts also require both greater support from, and deeper coordination with, other government agencies.

In addition, the United States needs to recognize that authoritarian upgrading is possible, in part, because of the support Arab regimes receive from business links to the United States, Asia, and European states. From the software that permits governments to control internet use to telecommunications infrastructure provided through international partnerships, upgrading is dependent upon technologies and expertise that Arab governments secure from outside the region. A truly integrated strategy of democracy promotion would require an oversight process for technology exports to the Arab world similar to those that now govern international trade in many other domains considered essential to U.S. national interests. End-use agreements that prevent the abuse of U.S. technology by authoritarian governments would be an important advance for efforts to bring U.S. policy into line with longstanding commitments to democratic reform in the Arab world.

Second, U.S. democracy promotion programs must adapt to changed strategies of authoritarian governance. There are no magic bullets that will achieve this transformation easily or quickly. Nor can the prospects for democracy promotion be detached from events in the region—in Iraq and the Palestinian territories in particular. These developments affect both regional and U.S. perceptions about whether, and in what form, democracy promotion policies should be continued.

Nonetheless, upgrading has not rendered Arab regimes immune to policies aimed at achieving further, and potentially more substantial, democratic reforms. One set of possibilities, in particular, deserve consideration: exploiting the potential fault lines within the coalitions that have emerged as a result of authoritarian upgrading, and creating incentives among the beneficiaries of upgrading to support meaningful processes of political reform. Together with more coherent and consistent support for democratic change by the United States, such approaches hold out tangible hope for progress on political reform.

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<sup>73</sup> Wittes and Yerkes, *op. cit.*

Authoritarian upgrading as a project is contingent upon the ability of Arab regimes to build and sustain new, broad-based authoritarian coalitions, linking the interests of widely diverse social groups to regime survival. Yet these coalitions are both unwieldy and only thinly consolidated. They are vulnerable to shifts in economic conditions that weaken the position of new economic and social élites. They are also subject to internal strains, both within regimes, and between regimes and their allies in societies. As ruling coalitions expand, new possibilities emerge for tensions and friction among their members. The wave of strikes in Egypt's textile sector that began in the fall of 2006 highlights the challenges regimes face in managing social coalitions that now include both business and labor.

These strains represent potential fault lines within emerging authoritarian coalitions and offer possible targets for an alternative strategy of democracy promotion. Such a strategy would not be designed to split off “moderates” from “hardliners” in the hope of accelerating authoritarian breakdowns, as “transitologists” might have it. Indeed, the likelihood of such breakdowns in the Arab world is low. Rather the intent is to create incentives for groups within authoritarian coalitions to benefit from the internal reform of the regimes that they currently support.

The most effective way to advance such aims is through policies that weaken the ties binding core constituencies to regimes. Yet this is not an aim that current democracy promotion efforts can address. What is needed instead are programs that would make it possible for broader segments of the private sector to benefit from economic reform, or that would engage with Arab regimes to link ongoing processes of social policy reform to programs of political reform. A number of specific steps to advance such aims are not only feasible but are in keeping with a more consistent and coherent overall U.S. democracy promotion policy. These include:

- Democratizing access to economic opportunities. Authoritarian upgrading is heavily depen-

dent upon the capacity of regimes to control access to markets and to manage the distribution of benefits associated with economic liberalization. Efforts that weaken this capacity can serve as a powerful source of political and social change. Measures that ensure fairness, accountability, and transparency in access to economic opportunities in areas that are vulnerable to U.S. influence have the potential to weaken one of the central elements of authoritarian upgrading. Over time, these measures will strengthen the rule of law. They will also contribute to the economic empowerment of private sectors that are less reliant on regimes for their profits, and that have an incentive to support political reforms that strengthen systems of economic governance;

- Strengthening links between social reform and political reform. Even as Arab governments retreat from populist and redistributive social policies they continue to struggle with problems of employment and job creation, social service provision, health care, housing, and education. The beneficiaries of these policies—the urban poor and middle classes, workers, students and youth—have long been among the core constituencies of Arab regimes. Today, however, their economic security and future prospects are far less certain. Addressing the concerns of social groups that are becoming increasingly marginal within Arab societies is among the greatest challenges confronting Arab governments in the Twenty-First century. The link between these issues and questions of governance has become increasingly clear in recent years, including to organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations. Yet U.S. democracy promotion agencies have not developed strategies to engage Arab governments with programs that address pressing social concerns through the lens of political reform and the reform of governance.

Such alternative approaches would mean redeploying U.S. democracy promotion resources and shifting

program priorities. The United States would have to reframe democracy promotion around broad-based policies designed to enhance the quality of governance, develop interventions that target a wider range of institutions and actors, and craft strategies aimed at loosening the economic ties that bind social groups to regimes. In turn, the success of such efforts is closely tied to the effectiveness with which the U.S. government embraces a comprehensive and systematic policy in support of political reform in the Arab world—and does so in coordination with allies and international institutions already active in these areas.

As these options indicate, democratic transitions in the Middle East are not likely to resemble those experienced in Eastern Europe or Latin America. Institutional rigidity, economic failures, and ideological exhaustion created the setting in which local civil societies and political oppositions could achieve rapid and decisive processes of democratization in Eastern Europe and Latin America. The unmaking of authoritarianism in the Arab world, if it occurs at all, will follow a differ-

ent course. It will probably be less dramatic, more ambiguous, and slower. Efforts to achieve this end, moreover, must contend with regimes that have proven to be more adaptive and flexible than many might have believed possible.

What seems clear, however, is that in the face of authoritarian upgrading, current policies that stress working from the outside by strengthening the democratic and oppositional potential of Arab societies have reached their limits. Improving the coherence and consistency of U.S. policy implementation, while at the same time working from the inside, pursuing opportunities to erode and weaken the coalitions on which authoritarian regimes rely, hold out stronger possibilities for further advancing the process of political reform and, perhaps, democratization in the Arab world. Sustaining current approaches to democracy promotion, in the absence of a coherent and consistent policy architecture, will fail to achieve the stated purposes of U.S. policy and will help to ensure the survival of authoritarianism in the Arab world well into the Twenty-First century.

## PROJECT ON MIDDLE EAST DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT

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This paper was produced as part of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy's Project on Middle East Democracy and Development (MEDD). The project aims to forge a new consensus on behalf of constructive U.S. engagement for change in the Middle East.

MEDD aims to address this challenge. It is led by Tamara Cofman Wittes, the Project Director and a Saban Center Senior Fellow, with the participation of Suzanne Maloney, a Saban Center Senior Fellow specializing in the political economy of the Persian Gulf region. MEDD also hosts the Patkin Visiting Fellows, experts from the Middle East with direct experience in political and economic reform.

MEDD is built on the premise that economic, social and political reform must be discussed and advanced together. Pairing political and economic analysis and bringing together U.S., European and regional activists and analysts, MEDD helps build an informed understanding on workable strategies to support of political and economic development in the Middle East. These insights strengthen the efforts of regional reformers as they seek to define a more effective course for change. Donor governments and others supporting reform also benefit from a better understanding of how to target their resources and manage complex transitions in the Middle East. The result is more effective development strategies and the creation of greater space for moderate political voices to counter Islamist extremism.

Saban Center publications addressing Middle East democracy and development include:

Tamara Cofman Wittes & Andrew Masloski, *Elections in the Arab World: Progress or Peril?*, Saban Center Middle East Memo #11, February 12, 2007;

Tamara Cofman Wittes & Sarah E. Yerkes, *What Price Freedom? Assessing the Bush Administration's Freedom Agenda*, Saban Center Analysis, Number 10, September 2006;

Abdel Monem Said Aly, *An Ambivalent Alliance: The Future of U.S.-Egyptian Relations*, Saban Center Analysis, Number 6, January 2006;

Tamara Cofman Wittes, *The 2005 Egyptian Elections: How Free? How Important?*, Saban Center Middle East Memo #8, August 24, 2005;

Paul Salem, *Lebanon at the Crossroads: Rebuilding An Arab Democracy*, Saban Center Middle East Memo #7, May 31, 2005;

Tamara Cofman Wittes & Sarah E. Yerkes, *The Middle East Partnership Initiative: Progress, Problems, and Prospects*, Saban Center Middle East Memo #5, November 29, 2004;

Tamara Cofman Wittes, *The New U.S. Proposal for a Greater Middle East Initiative: An Evaluation*, Saban Center Middle East Memo #2, May 10, 2004.

## THE SABAN CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY

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The Saban Center for Middle East Policy was established on May 13, 2002 with an inaugural address by His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan. The creation of the Saban Center reflects the Brookings Institution's commitment to expand dramatically its research and analysis of Middle East policy issues at a time when the region has come to dominate the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

The Saban Center provides Washington policymakers with balanced, objective, in-depth and timely research and policy analysis from experienced and knowledgeable scholars who can bring fresh perspectives to bear on the critical problems of the Middle East. The center upholds the Brookings tradition of being open to a broad range of views. The Saban Center's central objective is to advance understanding of developments in the Middle East through policy-relevant scholarship and debate.

The center's foundation was made possible by a generous grant from Haim and Cheryl Saban of Los Angeles. Ambassador Martin S. Indyk, Senior Fellow in Foreign Policy Studies, is the Director of the Saban Center. Kenneth M. Pollack is the center's Director of Research. Joining them is a core group of Middle East experts who conduct original research and develop innovative programs to promote a better understanding of the policy choices facing American decision makers in the Middle East. They include Tamara Cofman Wittes, a specialist on political reform in the Arab world who directs the Middle East Democracy and Development Project; Bruce Riedel, who served as a senior advisor to three Presidents on the Middle East and South Asia at the National Security Council during a twenty-nine year career in the CIA, a specialist on counterterrorism; Suzanne Maloney, a former senior State Department official who focuses on Iran and economic

development; Shibley Telhami, who holds the Sadat Chair at the University of Maryland; and Daniel Byman, a Middle East terrorism expert from Georgetown University. The center is located in the Foreign Policy Studies Program at Brookings, led by Brookings Vice President Carlos Pascual.

The Saban Center is undertaking path breaking research in five areas: the implications of regime change in Iraq, including post-war nation-building and Persian Gulf security; the dynamics of Iranian domestic politics and the threat of nuclear proliferation; mechanisms and requirements for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; policy for the war against terrorism, including the continuing challenge of state-sponsorship of terrorism; and political and economic change in the Arab world, and the methods required to promote democratization.

The Saban Center also houses the Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, which is directed by Stephen Grand, a Fellow in Foreign Policy Studies. The project focuses on analyzing the problems in the relationship between the United States and Muslim states and communities around the globe, with the objective of developing effective policy responses. The project's activities include: the Doha Forum, an annual global conference bringing together American and Muslim world leaders; a Ford Foundation Visiting Fellows program for specialists from the Muslim world; initiatives in science and the arts; and a monograph and book series. Under the directorship of Hady Amr, a Fellow in Foreign Policy Studies, the Saban Center is opening the Brookings-Doha Center in Qatar, which will extend the Brookings tradition of independent, in-depth research and quality public policy programs to Doha, and the broader Muslim world.



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