

Introduction

Political Aid in Theory and Practice

Jackbooted security forces raided the offices of foreign and Egyptian political think tanks on December 29, 2011, confiscating computers, records, cell phones, maps, documents, and cash. Five of the organizations targeted were overseas branches of the federally funded quasi-non-governmental National Democratic Institute (NDI), International Republican Institute (IRI), the International Center for Journalists, Freedom House, and Germany's Konrad Adenauer Foundation. The others were locally headquartered professional advocacy organizations, including the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights and the Arab Center for the Independence of Judges and Lawyers. The Minister of International Cooperation, Fayza Abounaga, often nicknamed "the iron lady," and a "Mubarak holdover," had asked prosecutors to investigate what foreign democracy brokers were up to, how Egyptian organizations received foreign aid, and whether they all had official authorization.

This news event was spun in various directions. That evening, Dawlat Soulam, a bilingual Egyptian-American, gave a scathing in-depth interview on a Channel 2 TV program called *The Truth (al-Haqiqah)* about why she and six colleagues had already resigned their jobs at IRI. She complained of blatant anti-Islamist bias in party training, CIA officers posing as democracy experts, grant-making according to ulterior motives, deliberate provocation of sectarian tensions, and anti-Egyptian prejudices expressed by drunken consultants at after-hours expatriate social gatherings. Soulam's accusations fed tales in Cairo's state-run media and unofficial rumor-mills about colonial agents undermining Egyptian sovereignty and fomenting instability.

Across town the following day, spokespersons for more than two dozen independent Egyptian civic organizations including the Egyptian Initiative

for Personal Rights and the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies held a press conference. They expressed outrage at the inordinately forceful crackdown on independent agencies that had been monitoring parliamentary elections or documenting human rights abuses before, during, and after the popular revolt that forced President Husni Mubarak from power. These organizations, their attorneys, and international rights advocates braced for another round in a long series of litigations. Several of them had already faced court charges mostly related to unauthorized receipt of foreign funds for political activities, but also including treason or other trumped-up accusations. One friend of this group wrote at the time that “while many Egyptians seem to have bought the official line that this was a long-overdue move aimed at subjecting foreign NGOs to local legislation and thus correcting a momentarily injured Egyptian sovereignty, pro-democracy activists suspect that the true purpose of the trial is nothing less than intimidating human rights organizations, and some even fear that the ultimate goal is to close down not only foreign but all human rights organizations working in Egypt.”¹

There was an outcry from Washington. Former Republican presidential nominee John McCain and former Secretary of State Madeline Albright, chairs of the boards of IRI and NDI, respectively, denounced the heavy-handed harassment of American-funded ‘non-governmental’ pro-democracy workers. President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton chimed in. Congress suspended payment on \$1.3 billion of military aid to Egypt (for fighter jets, army tanks, riot control gear, and intelligence consultations) before deciding to maintain this pivotal security arrangement. In the event, once bail was paid to allow most of the foreign defendants to evacuate around March 1, only Egyptians and permanent residents of Egypt employed by four foreign organizations actually stood trial. As this case stretched into 2013, the new Egyptian government proposed legislation further restricting associational freedoms and access to resources from abroad.

How can we sort through such conflicting claims and testimonials about justice, imperialism, and pushback? European, Canadian, and American experts in ‘political transitions’ had been working in Arab countries for a couple of decades. After the end of the Cold War, more intently after 9/11/2001, and in another spurt after the ‘youth’ uprisings in 2011, professional democracy brokers (and some amateurs) flocked to the region with projects to upgrade legal systems, institutionalize competitive

¹ Khaled Fahmy, “The Truth About Fayza,” *Egypt Independent*, February 26, 2012.

Questions and Preliminary Answers

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elections, encourage female participation, and organize liberal civic networks. Drawing on dollars, pounds sterling, and euros, often cooperating with United Nations programs, they were employed inside Egypt, Jordan, sometimes Lebanon, the Maghreb countries, Yemen, and the two exceptional ill-fated cases of Palestine and Iraq. They offered technical advice, collected data, wrote assessments, conducted seminars, ran public information campaigns, and made grants to national or regional public advocacy think tanks for projects on human rights, political reform, civil society, and related topics. Involvement varied over time and space. In some countries, foreign experts offered boilerplates for commercial legislation; in Iraq, Americans created new courts. To different degrees, foreigners participated in electoral events as technical consultants or volunteer monitors. Many donors worked directly with public sector or parastatal institutions such as parliamentary libraries or national councils for women. Other projects provided grants and training to civil society organizations defined as NGOs or CSOs. More broadly, democracy brokers sponsored or co-sponsored virtual networks and transnational conferences on topics such as how to run electoral campaigns, lobby for reforms to family law, or battle press censorship.

This book investigates how such projects work, their proximate outputs, and the experiences of practitioners.

QUESTIONS AND PRELIMINARY ANSWERS

My task is to describe and analyze the dynamics of Western or multilateral organizations' programs 'promoting' Arab transitions from authoritarianism in the context of national, regional, and international politics in the Middle East during two tumultuous decades. The main research question is not *whether* political aid 'worked,' but rather *how* it worked, in actual practice. What work gets done, how, by whom, to what effect? Who gets what, when, where, and how? What were the actual channels, mechanisms, and institutional practices – inter-governmental, for instance, or non-governmental? Where are the sites of interaction inside or beyond national boundaries? Who are the agents, intermediaries, and audiences? How were goals relating to justice, representation, women's rights, or civil society framed, routinized, or contested? How did theories about political transitions mesh or clash with pre-existing legal jurisdictions, political institutions, and public civic spheres? When, why and how did client governments embrace or reject overtures? How did initiatives jibe with the aspirations, inspirations, and counter-hegemonic claims of civic

activists? What did professionals and close-hand observers see as the proximate benefits or risks? How relevant is applied transitology to indigenous struggles for fair and decent governance? Does political aid advance social justice, representative political institutions, and popular empowerment; or authoritarian retrenchment; or imperial domination – or what?

In response to the basic question of how democracy promotion works in practice, I venture a simple answer, a basic argument, a composite theoretical structure, and a bottom-line political point. The simple answer is that political-development assistance consists of projects that are carried out by specialized professional agencies working through cross-national institutional channels. The specificities warrant further investigation. The straightforward argument is that institutional arrangements and professional practices across and inside national domains are contextual, complex, and often contested. Regardless of nationality, professionals know that transnational engagements in matters of law, elections, gender, and what is ‘non-governmental’ intersect with international and domestic power arrangements in complicated, sometimes counter-intuitive ways. The paradoxes encompass but go beyond what a famous historian called the collocation of “megalomania and messianism” in macro-level American foreign policy.² Agents and participant observers reflect ruefully on the mixed motives, messages, and blessings of political aid; ironic convergences of empowerment and power; ethical and practical dilemmas; differently scaled legal-political jurisdictions; grandiose plans gone awry; confluences and disruptions between domestic and international regimes; banal competition over symbolic capital, institutional access, and monetary advantage; and the rarified experience of conferences in fancy off-shore locations.

Amidst these complexities, I suggest that it helps to break political aid into its component parts, goals, and fields of specialization. The formal organizing thesis around which this book is structured is that practitioners and researchers in four key sectors – the rule of law sector, projects dealing with formal electoral politics, gender programming, and funding for civil society – each identify distinctive terminologies, establishments, and contradictions. Legal scholar-practitioners explore layered articulations, harmonizations, and rifts between and among legal regimes. In Iraq, the disruptions were colossal. It is in the field of elections that Western powers earned their reputation for hypocrisy, because in the Middle East the ‘high politics’ of geo-strategic alliances so often contradicted professional

² Eric J. Hobsbawm, “Spreading Democracy,” *Foreign Policy* (Sept/Oct 2004) 40–41.

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election monitoring and/or design. Feminist intellectuals and gender specialists debated cultural and institutional ways of ‘representing’ women. Civil society promotion and hostile counterattacks caused scholars and activists (not that these are mutually exclusive categories) to consider what it means to be governmental or not, national or not; and to analyze ironic convergences and separations between sovereign and transnational manners of governmentality.

My colleagues cited in this book variously have analyzed the salience of enduring authoritarianism; the diffusion of international law; armed interventions; feminist internationalism; neo-liberal globalization; and paradoxical interactions between or among these trajectories. Many grappled with ironies, contradictions, and dialectics: ‘the West’ both does and does not ‘promote’ human rights, ballot-driven political transitions, the struggles of Arab women, and civic freedom; democracy promotion is – but is not simply – an imperial venture; political aid might undermine or upgrade authoritarianism. There is an overarching tone of irony. I am going to suggest that seemingly antithetical hypotheses are concomitantly valid because contradictory trajectories are in play.

Beyond a straightforward answer, a narrative argument, and a thesis structure, *Political Aid and Arab Activism* aspires to solidarity with independent human rights defenders, election monitors, feminist activists, and independent advocacy organizations. We want to understand the reasoning of government officials; but our sympathies are with colleagues accused of purveying Western agendas. Therefore the evaluation of political aid must provide enough experiential and epistemological nuances to counter either vicious smear campaigns against politically engaged activist intellectuals or the sanctimonious naiveté of the Washington establishment. We seek, in other words, to confront complexities facing the mostly bilingual agents and actors caught between these conflicting narratives. The way to do this is to read the reports and commentaries they publish about their experiences and frustrations. This is a political point, but also a research strategy.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN, PROMOTING POLITICAL TRANSITIONS?

The “work” discourses must be investigated along two axes: (1) examining a text’s or ideology’s logics – the assumptions the discourse implies, its context-dependent uses, and the possibilities it forecloses; and (2) investigating the rhetoric’s effects – the ways in which that discourse is mediated, reiterated, and transmitted,

and how it is assessed and resignified over time through political organizations, extraordinary events, and everyday practices.³

We understand the first of these axes – the ideological postures of donors – better than its routines, outputs, and denouements overseas. Although later in this book I will cite books, reports, and articles generated by the political-aid industry, as well as academic studies of programs dealing with law, women, and civil society, most scholars are not familiar with praxis-level implementation. The undifferentiated notion of ‘democracy promotion’ is too abstract for empirical investigation. Political scientists comparing political change in authoritarian systems frequently referred nebulously to Western inspiration and influence but often paid little attention to the exact roles of foreign experts or the precise pathways of donor involvement. Instead ‘transitologists’ offered mostly descriptive policy studies of the ‘supply side’ of donor motivations, strategies, and intentions, on the one hand, or studies of the purely endogenous, domestic conditions favorable to democratic transitions, on the other.⁴ The most prominent works specifically about democracy promotion combine open advocacy for government funding with policy advice for donor agencies.⁵

The transnational democracy complex is so well-funded, professionalized, and prolific that in-house publications virtually flood the market with a steady stream of books and articles. The applied transitology genre is written for policy-makers, in an omniscient, imperative voice: experts tell donors, governments, and activists what they ‘should’ or ‘must’ do – or perhaps failed to do – to ‘get things right.’ I will draw upon the accumulated expert knowledge generated by full-time researchers, much of which is insightful and smart. Still, let us distinguish theoretically inspired academic inquiry from the professional policy genre that generates action recommendations. How-to policy manuals certainly make negative assessments of inconsistencies and wrong-headed policies, and many specialists

³ Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2008) 217.

⁴ Amichai Magen, *Evaluating External Influence on Democratic Development: Transition*, Center on Democracy, Development, and The Rule of Law, Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford University, CDDRL Working Paper 111, March 2009, Palo Alto, California: 18–20.

⁵ See, for instance, Larry Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy: The Struggle to Build Free Societies throughout the World* (New York: Times Books/Henry Holt, 2008); the classic piece by Thomas Carothers, “The End of the Transitions Paradigm,” *Journal of Democracy*, 13:1 (2002) 5–21; Tamara Coffman Wittes, *Freedom’s Unsteady March: America’s Role in Building Arab Democratization* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2008).

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acknowledge that in the Middle East American democracy promotion in particular has a bad name. Trade publications do not, however, entertain alternative hypotheses, cite critical explanations, or pay much attention to commentary from purported beneficiaries. Democracy promotion is described in very general terms as providing practical, advisory, technical and financial support to ‘democratic agents’ overseas, usually working with foreign governments but sometimes provoking authoritarian backlash.⁶ Specialists distinguish technical advice for government institutions from support for civil society groups, noting that either way, almost all political aid consists of information services via consultancies, conferences, or grants for research and/or outreach projects.⁷ Tools for critically analyzing the effects of advice and information are few and rather rudimentary, however, and the appraisal effort is largely driven by agency-financed research on how donors meet mission-statement goals.⁸ My purpose in this book is to analyze policy and professional practice; it is not to give policy advice.

Since the majority of policy papers and books on the topic are written from Washington’s point of view, some readers will instinctively think of democracy promotion as Uncle Sam’s soliloquy, for better or for worse. The autobiographical account is often told as the saga of a lone superpower in the Middle Eastern theater introspectively trying to reconcile ideals and insecurities. Given massive deployments, forceful interventions, arms exports, world-conquering military expenditures, and the preponderant American role in Iraq, perhaps Egypt, and the Israel/Palestine conundrum, this realist focus on the intentions driving American unilateralism makes sense. Even the juxtaposition of sentimental idealism with the calculations of a self-interested rational actor can be a useful heuristic for understanding contradictory official transcripts issued by professional

⁶ These points have been made by Peter Burnell, “From Evaluating Democracy Assistance to Appraising Democracy Promotion,” *Political Studies* 56 (2008) 414–434; Amichai Magen, “The Rule of Law and Its Promotion Abroad: Three Problems of Scope,” *Stanford Journal of International Law* 51 (2009) 51–115; Michele Acuto, “Wilson Victorious? Understanding Democracy Promotion in the Midst of a ‘Backlash,’” *Alternatives* 33 (2008) 461–480.

⁷ Tamara Cofman Wittes and Andrew Masloski, “Democracy Promotion under Obama: Lessons from the Middle East Partnership Initiative,” Saban Center for Middle East Policy Paper 13, Brookings Institution, Washington, May 2009.

⁸ See the statistically sophisticated multivariate cross-national analysis of correlations between USAID democratic governance funding and measures of democratization in Steven E. Finkel, Anibal Pérez-Liñán, and Mitchell A. Seligson, “The Effects of U.S. Foreign Assistance on Democracy Building, 1990–2003,” *World Politics* 59 (2007) 404–439: 438.

democracy brokers, the State Department, the Pentagon, and/or political leaders. Moreover, many Middle East specialists advance the counter-narrative of a superpower determined to dominate the region using tools including political aid. Nonetheless, this book is not only about American intentions, Americans abroad, or anti-Americanism.

To the contrary, singular focus on the U.S. juggernaut tends to obfuscate analysis in two ways. First, and for our overall purposes, foremost, it over-determines rather than investigates outcomes. The path-dependent projection of superpower discourages serious exploration of what happens next – how various actors ‘over there,’ on ‘the receiving end,’ interpret transcripts and reproduce institutional practices. Preliminarily, then, we might pause to consider how people in different countries might view the cover photograph for this book showing Marines mounting the statue of Saddam, or what the act of casting ballots signified for Iraqis in 2005, or what a voter with purple ink on her finger was communicating when she flashed a V-sign to a photographer?⁹ Later we will try to understand how various actors react to, act upon, or re-purpose the symbolic and institutional default modes of political aid in specific contexts. This includes (but is not limited to) authoritarian pushback.

The second reason to eschew a narrow focus on American policies is that it can artificially and misleadingly separate them from the work of UN, European, Canadian, and other agencies. Narcissistic monologues belie the cosmopolitan intellectual roots and transnational networks of democratic internationalism. Lofty ideals, capitalist expansion, and geo-strategic superstructures fuse in a ‘democratic peace’ or ‘pacific union’ theory of enlightened multilateralism that is grounded in universal, not uniquely American, values.¹⁰ Most contemporary innovations in international law, expertise in elections, and gender rights originate outside the United States, as we will see. The conference circuit is very multicultural. A Washington industry insider described a “democracy bureaucracy” loosely centered in the dense institutional complex in the District of Columbia but dispersed worldwide and lacking a “command and control center.”¹¹ Going further, a conservative Republican decried a “post

⁹ On the importance of signification, see Lisa Wedeen, “Conceptualizing Culture: Possibilities for Political Science,” *The American Political Science Review* 96:4 (2002) 713–728.

¹⁰ The interplay of idealism, realism, and economic reasoning in enlarging the pacific union was analyzed by Michael W. Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).

¹¹ Thomas O. Melia, “The Democracy Bureaucracy: The Infrastructure of American Democracy Promotion,” Discussion Paper for the Princeton Project on National Security Working Group on Global Institutions and Foreign Policy Infrastructure, Washington, September, 2005: 1–2.

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democratic” “global governance regime” . . . “promoted and run by complementary and interlocking networks” of leftist “Sixty-Eighters.”¹² All in all, as we will see, Uncle Sam may steal the limelight, but other roles are pivotal to plot development. Ergo, this is not a book about American foreign policy as told from Washington’s perspective, nor a study of Arab reactions to American initiatives. International law, multinational initiatives, and cosmopolitan codes of behavior transcend American foreign policy objectives and hegemonic aspirations.

If American might is just one arc that requires scrutiny, how can we conceptualize the political development enterprise? Very broadly, social scientists offer two main sets of hypotheses about the global governance regime. The more sanguine view, if you will, accentuates the catalytic power of ideas institutionalized in signatory conventions that gradually gain compliance from increasing numbers of states. This ‘constructivist’ paradigm holds that transnational networks gradually universalize norms, rules, institutions, and procedures governing sovereign and even non-state behavior in particular issue areas.¹³ International regimes share distinctive catchphrases, templates, and standards via conferences, training, documentation, web-links, and institution-building activities. They constitute “epistemic communities” of knowledgeable specialists to generate and disseminate the “reasons, habits, expectations, and compelling arguments” for cosmopolitan processes and policies.¹⁴ Now, one realist argument is that the superpower delegates implementation of

¹² John Fonte, “Democracy’s Trojan Horse,” *The National Interest* (Summer 2004) 117–118. Referring to leftist protests in the United States, France, and other Western countries in 1968, Fonte warns that national sovereignty “is increasingly circumscribed by the growing strength of the global institutions, laws, rules, and ideological norms.”

¹³ Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Disorder in World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), argued that the United States was the prime mover in some, but not all, international regimes. Initially a theory of inter-governmental institutions, the concept of regimes was later applied to the grey area of non- and quasi-non-governmental organizations, according to James Bohman, “International Regimes and Democratic Governance: Political Equality and Influence in Global Institutions,” *International Affairs* 75 (1999) 499–513.

¹⁴ Emanuel Adler and Peter M. Haas, “Conclusion: Epistemic Communities, World Order, and the Creation of a Reflective Research Program,” *International Organization* 45:1 (1992) 367–390: 372. See also Andrew P. Cortell and James W. Davis, Jr., “Understanding the Domestic Impact of International Norms: A Research Agenda,” *International Studies Review*, 2:1 (2000) 65–87; Rodger A. Payne, “Persuasion, Frames, and Norm Construction,” *European Journal of International Relations*, 7:1 (2001) 37–61; and Amitav Acharya, “How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism,” *International Organization* 58 (2004) 239–275.

some high principles to allies and multilateral institutions in order “to facilitate construction of an order conducive to its interests.”¹⁵ This is certainly a hypothesis worth entertaining. Liberal internationalists reply, however, that universal norms, multilateral efforts, leadership from ‘middle powers’ such as the Netherlands and Canada, polyglot teams, and ‘non-governmental’ organizations minimize the perception of meddling in domestic politics, thereby increasing the acceptability of democracy assistance. They distinguish, in other words, inter-governmental institutions and transnational regimes from American imperialism, arguing – normatively, heuristically, and empirically – for multilateralism over unilateralism.¹⁶ In each field of investigation in this book some thoughtful analysis shows how international regimes express universal values, influence state reforms, or bolster the efforts of activists to defend against despotism. Moreover, this perspective encourages recognition that Arab jurists, elections monitors, feminists, and civic activists are agents, and not simply recipients, of cosmopolitan norms. In the best-case scenarios, international rights conventions, techniques for exposing electoral fraud, transnational women’s advocacy, and support for independent intellectual production empower a social justice vanguard to work for better governance. The resources of political aid might tip the balance in their favor.

However, other progressive scholars associate dense vertical networks radiating from Europe and North America with neo-liberal globalization’s assault on states and their welfare projects. Human rights regimes, election monitoring, gender empowerment agendas, and NGO networks can all perpetuate global capitalist expansion and modes of governmentality dictated by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization. From this perspective, limited political reform initiatives are meant to subjugate national sovereignty to Western

¹⁵ G. John Ikenberry and Charles A. Kupchan, “Socialization and Hegemonic Power,” *International Organization* 44:3 (1990) 283–315: 284.

¹⁶ Jon C. Pevehouse, “Democracy from the Outside-In? International Organizations and Democratization,” *International Organization* 56:3 (2002) 515–549: 523, suggests that international rather than purely bilateral involvement may reassure business elites and military officers. To offset criticisms of overt and covert manipulations of elections in Central America and Southeast Asia, Washington financed more multilateral efforts, according to David P. Forsythe and Barbara Ann Rieffer, “US Foreign Policy and Enlarging the Democratic Community”: *Human Rights Quarterly* 22: 4 (2000) 998–1010. This argument for multilateralism was applied to Iraq by Rob Jenkins, “Collateral Benefit: Iraq and Increased Legitimacy for International Trusteeship,” *Dissent* 53: 2 (2006) 72–75.