Introduction

The Book's Central Question and Rationale

The attacks against the United States of 11 September 2001 stunned the world and left a shocked American public wondering 'why do they hate us?' In the debate that followed in US public policy and academic fora, a consensus quickly formed that the terrorism of al Qaeda – and Islamist terrorism more generally – was the product of a democratic deficit in the Middle East. Not everyone agreed that this was the *only* cause; many argued that Islam itself, poverty and social anomie, or resentment towards US policies in the Middle East were also possible answers. However, there were few detractors of the proposition that brutal authoritarianism in the Middle East was a key reason behind the renewed threat of Islamist terrorism now confronting the world.

The causal links appeared self-evident. Being excluded from political processes deprived Islamists of the opportunity to peacefully express their views and pursue their political objectives. It prevented them from becoming socialised in the norms of negotiation and compromise, the ordinary give-and-take of politics. Isolation forced some of these individuals and groups to take up arms. Repression, in the form of imprisonment, torture and persecution of themselves and their loved ones, exacerbated feelings of alienation from their respective societies and governments and sowed hatred in their hearts. Regimes encouraged virulent anti-American rhetoric in place of dissent and exported troublemakers to assure internal stability.[1]

[1] This argument was made in relation to the Egyptian and Saudi Arabian regimes in particular because Egyptians and Saudis were most prominently involved in the 11

The idea for the book developed as I considered these connections between democracy and terrorism. They appeared obvious and commonsensical, but were they borne out by the facts? The phenomenon of terrorism outside the Middle East – in Asia, South America, Africa and even more so in Europe and the United States – seemed, at first glance at least, unrelated to issues of democracy or the lack thereof. Was the presumed link between the lack of democracy and Islamist terrorism yet another instance of Middle East or Islamic 'exceptionalism', the view that the concepts and modes of analysis of social science do not apply either to the Middle East region or the Islamic religion as they do to the rest of the world?[2] The book aims to investigate the alleged causal relationship between the lack of democracy in the Middle East region and Islamist terrorism and to draw (or allow the reader to draw) well-informed theoretical and policy conclusions based on this investigation.

I have set myself a limited task: not to take on the broader question 'what causes Islamist terrorism?' but to isolate one suggested explanation, the lack of democracy, and test it using concrete case studies from the Middle East. My focus excludes non-Islamist terrorism – for example leftist or nationalist – which has also been rife in the Middle East. With the partial exception of al Qaeda, it also excludes Islamist terrorist movements from beyond the Middle East region but in other ways, and more specifically in its wide range of case studies, the book aims for breadth. Excellent work on the linkages between (the lack of) democracy or political participation and Islamist terrorism (although sometimes under a different label, for example 'rebellion' or 'extremism') has been published in recent years. It includes monographs by Jennifer Noyon,[3] Jillian Schwedler[4] and Muhammad Hafez.[5] However, these works focus on a small number of cases. At the inevitable cost of covering the material in relatively less depth, I aim to provide a fuller, albeit

September 2001 attacks. Josh Pollack, 'Saudi Arabia and the United States, 1931–2002', *Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA)* 6 (3) September 2002.

[2] The George W. Bush administration also appeared to consider the Middle East as 'exceptional' in that, as Thomas Carothers pointed out, the democracy drive was 'almost absent from the main pillars of Bush policy toward the rest of the world', that is, outside the Middle East. Thomas Carothers, 'Debating Democracy', *The National Interest*, 90, July/August 2007, p. 9.

[3] Jennifer Noyon, *Islam, Politics and Pluralism: Theory and Practice in Turkey, Jordan, Tunisia and Algeria*, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2003.

[4] Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

[5] Mohammed M. Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and Resistance in the Islamic World*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2003.

not exhaustive, view of the relationship between democracy and Islamist terrorism in the entire Middle East region.

US Democracy Promotion in the Middle East after 11 September 2001

Investigating the relationship between authoritarianism and Islamist terrorism has important policy implications for US foreign policy in the Middle East. In the post-9/11 period this policy was driven, at least rhetorically, by the assumption that actively promoting democracy in the region would encourage widespread political reform and democratisation, and in doing so ultimately serve US interests.

The idea of the United States as a beacon of democracy has always been a powerful (albeit controversial) element in US foreign policy, and its implications have been continually contested. During the Cold War, US foreign policy in the Middle East was driven primarily by the *realpolitik* aims of containing the Soviet Union, securing petroleum supplies and ensuring the survival of Israel.[6] The end of the Cold War and the perceived victory over the Soviet Union changed this to some degree: The foreign policy of the two consecutive Bill Clinton administrations (1993–2001) was influenced by liberal internationalist values both globally and, to a lesser extent, in the Middle East, where a combination of idealistic and pragmatic considerations brought about greater attention to 'democracy promotion'. Given the 'democratic peace theory', whereby democracies do not go to war with one another, democracy was seen not only as a good in itself but also a means of resolving conflict in a region plagued by dissent and war. The results of this shift were limited, however, as the main 'driver' of policy throughout the 1990s remained the desire for stability by way of supporting pro-Western, if authoritarian regimes.[7]

This changed dramatically after 9/11. As previously noted, in the search for the cause of the attacks unanimously attributed to al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden, the argument that Islamist terrorism was the outcome of a democratic deficit in the Middle East quickly gained currency. Although this view was widely shared by many across the political spectrum, both in policy circles and among prominent commentators,

[6] US support for Israel cannot be reduced solely to *realpolitik* considerations, of course, and sometimes even clashed with them.

[7] The literature on the democratic peace theory is enormous, but Russett's classic study is still worth consulting. Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993.

its greatest impact on US foreign policy occurred as a group of so-called neo-conservatives gradually became the dominant element in the first administration of George W. Bush (2001–5). The neo-cons agreed with others across the political spectrum that the lack of democracy led to Islamist terrorism. However, they were unique in the aggressive manner in which they proposed to remedy this, and introduce democracy in the region, via the United States' newly launched 'war on terror'. They were also extreme, as we shall see below, in making democracy promotion instrumental to pursuing their own interpretation of US interests, not only in combating terror but also in ensuring US ascendancy and a newly found sense of mission across the globe.

Soon after the attacks of 9/11, a spate of policy initiatives on promoting reform in the Middle East were launched by the Bush administration. Announced in December 2002, the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) was the flagship democracy-promotion programme, embodying the new approach and diverting more funds to democratic reform. The Greater Middle East Initiative (which became Broader Middle East and North Africa Partnership Initiative [BMENA]) was announced in June 2004 at the G8 summit in Atlanta, Georgia. It included Pakistan and Afghanistan in the targeted 'broader' Middle East area and aimed to involve US allies as well as local partners in promoting democracy. A number of parallel initiatives such as the establishment of Radio Sawa ('Together') and al Hurra ('The Free') television station targeted 'hearts and minds' in the Middle East in an attempt to create favourable attitudes towards the United States and imbue them with US values. Assuming a causal connection between economic and political liberalization – a long-standing tenet in US foreign policy – the Bush administration announced its intention to conclude free trade agreements with individual Arab states, and eventually did so with Jordan, Morocco, Bahrain and Oman. It also envisioned the creation of a free trade area in the region by 2013.[8]

Such concrete policy initiatives were reinforced through traditional and public diplomacy. Members of the Bush administration made the US intention to encourage democracy in the Middle East clear on several occasions. One of the main themes in President Bush's National Endowment of Democracy speech in November 2003 was democratic

[8] Tamara Cofman Wittes and Sarah Yerkes, *What Price Freedom? Assessing the Bush Administration's Freedom Agenda*, Saban Centre for Middle East Policy, Analysis Paper 10, September 2006, p. 6.

reform in the Middle East. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice suggested a role for 'transformational' diplomacy ('hands-on efforts by US envoys globally to promote and build good governance and rule by the people') in affecting change in the region.[9] In contrast with previous practice, it was expected that US embassy officials on the ground and US administration officials visiting the Middle East would give democracy and human rights more prominence in their contacts with regional governments. There was also an expectation – though this was not always explicit – that the United States could make economic and even military aid conditional on progress towards reform.[10]

The Bush administration, driven by its neo-conservative ideologues, pursued its democracy promotion policies while at the same time violating international legality and ignoring its own human rights treaty obligations.[11] The most extreme instance of this discrepancy was its decision to invade Iraq, which was in part presented as another means of pursuing democracy in the region. While the 2003 Iraq war followed on from the 2001 intervention in Afghanistan, it was very different in purpose and rationale. The reasons behind it, real and purported, are complex and will not be discussed at length here. Briefly, however, the United States and its coalition partners argued that they and their allies were threatened by the government of Saddam Hussein because it was in the process of acquiring weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) which could potentially be made available to terrorist groups. An extended interpretation of pre-emptive self-defense (far beyond the conventional and accepted definition of pre-emption as a response to imminent attack) was therefore offered by the Bush administration and its coalition partners as the main justification for the invasion. A parallel, albeit intermittent, argument was also made, based on the view that democratic change in the region would benefit the United States by draining the recruitment pool for Islamist terrorists. Rapidly and forcefully transforming Iraq into a democracy would produce a 'tsunami' of political reform in the

[9] Guy Dinmore, 'Critics of "Utopian" Foreign Policy Fail to Weaken Bush Resolve', *Financial Times*, 13 January 2006. See also Justin Vaisse, *Transformational Diplomacy*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Challiot Paper 103, June 2007, http://www.vaisse.net/BiblioJustin/Livres/Justin_Vaisse_Transformational-Diplomacy_Chaillot-Paper_103_July_2007.pdf, accessed 18 January 2010.

[10] For instance, small-scale conditioning of aid to Egypt was used by Congress to promote tentative steps in democratization in 2005. Cofman Wittes and Yerkes, *What Price Freedom?*, p. 26.

[11] Kenneth Roth, 'The Wrong Way to Combat Terrorism', *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 14 (1) Fall/Winter 2007, pp. 263–72.

Middle East and serve as a model or beacon for the transformation of other authoritarian regimes in the region along democratic lines.[12]

Initial reaction in the Middle East to the announcement of US policies of democracy promotion was derision and incredulity, both at a popular level and among political commentators and officials.[13] As Tunisian human rights activist Moncef Marzouki argued, this reaction exposed the serious credibility gap in US policy.[14] A common response from the region, as well as from critics in the West and elsewhere, was that the United States was being hypocritical, and that the rhetoric on democracy hid ulterior motives which would ultimately prevail and ensure uninterrupted US support for Middle East dictators. Very soon, the critics were vindicated. The United States hailed the democratic reforms of its friendly regimes such as Jordan, Bahrain and Qatar as substantial, whereas in fact they were shallow, limited and easily reversible. Despite its profound authoritarianism, Tunisia was described as a 'stable democracy'[15] and its president, Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, feted by Bush shortly after the latter's 'forward strategy for freedom' speech.[16] By contrast, democracy was used as a 'stick' with which to beat US rivals such as the Syrian and Iranian regimes and the Palestinian Authority.[17]

A second reaction was furious indignation at both the US presumption of being an agent of democracy in the region and its attempt to interfere in the internal affairs of regional states. The impossibility of separating the message from the messenger – with its long history and continuing involvement in the region on the side of Israeli suppression of Palestinian rights and authoritarian Middle Eastern states – thus became quickly apparent in the post-9/11 politics of democracy promotion.[18]

[12] Marina Ottaway, Thomas Carothers, Amy Hawthorne and Daniel Brumberg, *Democratic Mirage in the Middle East*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Brief 20, October 2002.

[13] Marina Ottaway, 'The Problem of Credibility', Thomas Carothers & Marina Ottaway (eds.), *Uncharted Journey: Promoting Democracy in the Middle East*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment, 2005, pp. 173–92.

[14] Moncef Marzouki, 'The US Project for Democracy in the Greater Middle East – Yes, But With Whom?' (Arabic), *Al Hayat*, 23 February 2004; quoted in Gilbert Achcar, 'Fantasy of a Region that Does Not Exist: Greater Middle East: The US Plan', *Monde Diplomatique*, April 2004.

[15] Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2002*, New York: Human Rights Watch, 2002, p. 405.

[16] Neil Hicks, 'Our Friend the Autocrat', *Washington Post*, 16 February 2004.

[17] Katerina Dalacoura, 'US Democracy Promotion in the Arab Middle East since 11 September 2001: A Critique', *International Affairs*, 81 (5) 2005, p. 969.

[18] Ibid., p. 973.

Critics pointed out that on its own home ground (which in effect included Guantanamo Bay, despite its special legal status), the United States was sacrificing civil liberties in the 'war on terror' and that this was extended to its allies in the Middle East region who increasingly used 'terrorism' in the post-9/11 climate as an easy way of assuring US support for their repressive policies.[19]

A third criticism of US democracy promotion policies was that despite the lofty statements and the grand policy initiatives of the post-9/11 era, they were short on substance and lacking in fresh ideas. Critics were quick to point out, for example, that the projects proposed by MEPI did not differ much from those of the 1990s. Likewise, many of the components of BMENA were already present in pre-existing US (and European) programmes.[20]

However, despite their limitations and flaws, and the negative local reactions, US democracy promotion policies – or at least the rhetoric – caused lively debate in the region on the need for, and possible direction of, reform.[21] A wide range of political actors, including Islamist groups, took part in this debate. For instance, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt responded to the proposal for the Greater Middle East Initiative (later BMENA) of the G8 in March 2004 by issuing its own reform programme.[22] Another outcome of US attention to democracy was a brief and narrow opening of political space in some Middle Eastern states. For example, US pressure led to unprecedented public discussion in Egypt about whether it was right that Hosni Mubarak should again run as presidential candidate, and for the first time an alliance of opposition parties began to voice demands that he stand down. This marked the beginning of the Kifaya ('enough') movement which came to life in 2004–5.[23] Although a campaign against foreign interference had

[19] Mhand Berkouk, *US-Algerian Security Cooperation and the War on Terror*, Carnegie Endowment Web Commentary, June 2009, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=23276, accessed 18 January 2010.

[20] International Crisis Group, *The Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative: Imperilled at Birth*, Middle East and North Africa Briefing, June 2004; and Marina Ottaway and Thomas Carothers, *The Greater Middle East Initiative: Off to a False Start*, Carnegie Endowment Policy Report 29, March 2004.

[21] Thomas Carothers, *A Better Way to Support Middle East Reform*, Carnegie Endowment, Policy Brief 33, February 2005. See also Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2002*, p. 392.

[22] Official website of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.asp?ID=5172%26SectionID=356, accessed 26 October 2009.

[23] Issandr Amrani, 'Mubarak's Last Stand?', *Middle East International*, 742, 21 January 2005.

been sweeping the country, external pressure was also a major factor in Mubarak's decision to amend article 76 of the Egyptian constitution to allow multi-party presidential elections for the first time.[24]

The year 2005 was the high point of the Bush administration's democracy-promotion policies in the Middle East. In that year, there was a 'tentative sense' that a twilight might be descending on authoritarian governments, with the aforementioned changes in Egypt, and also Lebanon (where a so-called 'Cedar Revolution' precipitated a Syrian withdrawal from the country), municipal elections in Saudi Arabia, elections in Iraq and the Palestinian Occupied Territories and the granting of the vote to women in Kuwait. The US commentator Thomas Friedman argued that the invasion of Iraq 'triggered the first real "conversation" about political reform in the Arab world in a long, long time'.[25] For others, the Iraqi election of 2005 suggested that 'democracy is indeed an idea whose time has come for the Arab world'.[26]

However, far from causing substantial and far-reaching change, the results of US democracy-promotion policies in the Middle East proved to be a flash in the pan. In response to BMENA, a number of ostentatious conferences named 'Forum for the Future' brought together Middle East and G8 governments and civil society representatives. In the 'Conference on Democracy' held in Yemen in January 2004, 600 delegates of Middle East governments, NGOs and international organizations assembled to discuss reform. A meeting at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Egypt in March 2004 produced the Alexandria Statement, but despite the furor surrounding these events, their net effect on reform was questionable. They were government-led affairs which aimed to co-opt civil society activists, not give them space to assert their demands. The pro-reform statements produced on these occasions were general enough to render them innocuous. In the sharp words of the late Egyptian liberal activist Said el Neggar, rather than raising real problems in specific countries, the documents' authors 'wanted to tackle the reform question in a diplomatic way that would not offend the authorities'.[27]

[24] Paul Schemm, 'Grand Gesture', *Middle East International*, 745, 4 March 2005, pp. 19–20.
[25] Thomas Friedman, 'At Least Iraq's Got the Arabs Talking', *International Herald Tribune*, 20 February 2004.
[26] Editorial, 'The People of Iraq Speak', *Daily Telegraph*, 14 February 2005.
[27] Said el Naggar, 'The Alexandria Statement', *al Wafd*, 25 April 2004 (unofficial translation from the Arabic by Robert Springborg and Ahmed Ezzelarab).

On the ground, too, the reality of change was limited. There occurred no liberal–Islamist convergence in favour of reform, nor widespread and sustained movement in this direction.[28] Kifaya remained an elite affair, incapable of denting authoritarianism in Egypt. As I have already suggested, governments responded to perceived US pressure with moves which appeared substantial but were in fact merely cosmetic, designed to deflect criticism by giving the appearance of reform. One example was the previously mentioned constitutional amendment of the Egyptian presidential election the impact of which, paradoxically, was to divert political debate and silence critics without permitting true pluralism in the presidential race.[29] Elections in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries caught the headlines in the West and gave the appearance of reform to the outside world but for the most part were extremely circumscribed events often to elect (segments of) powerless national assemblies or weak municipal authorities which could barely affect the authoritarian structures of Gulf states. The Cedar Revolution quickly gave way to the hard reality of confessionalism in Lebanon. Despite the elation accompanying the Iraq elections of 2005, the impact of the Iraq war on the Middle East region was actually a *retreat* of reform movements. One example of this was Iran where the insecurity created by the US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan allowed conservative clerics to further depoliticize and demobilize the population, at least in the short run.[30]

The final nails in the coffin of US democracy promotion in the post-9/11 Middle East were hammered in by the electoral successes of anti-Western Islamist forces. The election in December 2005 of eighty-eight Muslim Brotherhood (nominally independent) candidates to the Egyptian parliament and the subsequent resounding electoral victory of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) in January 2006 in the Palestinian Occupied Territories rammed home to the United States that freer elections in the Middle East could mean gains for Islamist anti-Western opposition movements.

Disillusionment led to a subtle yet real change of tone in Washington, which commentators quickly started to describe as a 'backlash' against

[28] Amy Hawthorne, 'The New Reform Ferment', Thomas Carothers and Marina Ottaway (eds.), *Uncharted Journey: Promoting Democracy in the Middle East*, Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment, 2005, pp. 57–77.

[29] Author's interview with Hishem Kassem, journalist and political activist, Cairo, November 2007. I take this issue up again in the Conclusion.

[30] Hadi Semati, 'Democracy in Retrograde', *Los Angeles Times*, 24 September 2004.

democracy promotion.[31] Leading neo-conservative thinker Robert Kaplan, for example, now suggested that pursuing 'normality' had become more important than 'democracy' in the Middle East.[32] Realist, liberal and other critics of the neo-conservative project reasserted their positions. The opinion that democracy cannot defeat terrorism and that democracy promotion endangers long-held US interests in the Middle East region was restated forcefully.[33] Others pointed out that spreading democracy was a 'gift' to Iran's government, a long-standing antagonist of the United States.[34]

By 2006, with the United States clearly backtracking from its commitment to democratic change, authoritarian Middle East regimes – sensing that the United States was back to 'business as usual' – began reversing the tentative reforms and clamping down on the limited democratic openings they had allowed over the previous two to three years. As soon as the United States signalled it had lost faith in democratization, there was crackdown on dissent.[35] The stalling of democracy in the Arab world – and in particular the cases of Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Yemen and Saudi Arabia – was also helped by economic booms which stifled demands for political reform.[36] Freedom House reported in 2006 that there was 'freedom stagnation' and growing 'pushback' in the Middle East and beyond.[37]

The Book's Argument and Methodology

US democracy promotion policies in the Middle East came full circle with the end of the second Bush administration in January 2009. However,

[31] Amira Howeidy, 'Democracy's Backlash', *Al Ahram Weekly Online*, 785, 9–15 March 2006, http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/785/eg3.htm, accessed 18 January 2010. See also Thomas Carothers, 'The Backlash Against Democracy Promotion', *Foreign Affairs*, 85 (2) 2006, pp. 55–68.

[32] Robert Kaplan, 'We Can't Force Democracy: Creating Normality is the Real Mideast Challenge', *Washington Post*, 2 March 2006.

[33] F. Gregory Gause III, 'Can Democracy Stop Terrorism?', *Foreign Affairs*, 84 (5) 2005, pp. 62–76; see also the remarks attributed to Gause in: *Democratizing the Middle East?*, The Fares Center for Eastern Mediterranean Studies, Tufts University, Occasional Paper 2, 2006, pp. 41–6.

[34] Ted Koppel, 'Gifts for Iran: Look What Spreading Democracy Can Do', *International Herald Tribune*, 22 July 2006.

[35] Howeidy, 'Democracy's Backlash'.

[36] Hassan Fattahm 'Drive for Democracy Stalls in Arab World', *International Herald Tribune*, 10 April 2006.

[37] Freedom House, *Freedom in the World Report 2007*, www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=15, accessed 18 January 2010.