

Advance Praise for *Realism and Democracy*

“Elliott Abrams has done the country another important service. This outstanding book reminds us that the enduring power of America is that, at our best, we see our interests as our values, and our values as our interests. Now more than ever, Americans and their leaders need to understand that support for human rights has been, and should remain, a key pillar of U.S. foreign policy. This book could not be more timely or more significant.”

– Senator John McCain

“Elliott Abrams gives us a brilliant review of the fight for freedom, showing with clarity what works and what does not. But even more, he highlights the possibilities for progress that may be gained from a determined, long-term strategy advocating democracy and human rights.”

– The Honorable George P. Shultz

“A powerful and persuasive argument that realism as well as American ideals should lead us to support the struggle for freedom.”

– Joseph Lieberman, former US Senator from Connecticut,
Senior Counsel, Kasowitz, Benson, and Torres

“Since the 1980s, no US official has done more to advance the cause of democracy and human rights than Elliott Abrams. Here bringing his vast experience to bear on American policy in the Middle East, he makes a powerful, pragmatic case for promoting democratic reform in Egypt and other Arab autocracies. Sure to be controversial in the best sense – his arguments cannot be ignored.”

– Robert Kagan, Senior Fellow, Brookings Institute,
author of *The World America Made*

“Drawing on his experience as a maker and an observer of American foreign policy over many decades and presidential administrations, Elliott Abrams offers a powerful and timely case for why the United States should continue working to advance democracy, human rights, and universal values in the Middle East – not just for instrumental reasons, but also as ends in and of themselves.”

– Senator Marco Rubio

“America’s greatest asset in world politics is its association with freedom. Elliott Abrams brings unique experience as an American official who understood the power of freedom – and realized that an American strategy to advance democracy advances American interests. Here he explains how men like Scoop Jackson, George Shultz, and Ronald Reagan worked to support liberty and democracy – and how to build on their legacy today, including in the Arab world. Every official in the State Department should be required to read this book.”

– Natan Sharansky, Chairman of the Jewish Agency, human rights activist and former political prisoner in the Soviet Union

REALISM AND DEMOCRACY

America is turning away from support for democrats in Arab countries in favor of “pragmatic” deals with tyrants to defeat violent Islamist extremism. For too many policy makers, Arab democracy is seen as a dangerous luxury. In *Realism and Democracy*, Elliott Abrams marshals four decades of experience as an American official and leading Middle East expert to show that deals with tyrants will not work. Islamism is an idea that can only be defeated by a better idea: democracy. Through a careful analysis of America’s record of democracy promotion in the region and beyond, from the Cold War to the Obama years, Abrams proves that repression helps Islamists beat democrats, while political openings offer moderates and liberals a chance. This book makes a powerful argument for an American foreign policy that combines practical politics and idealism and refuses to abandon those struggling for democracy and human rights in the Arab world.

Elliott Abrams is Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. He served as Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights under Ronald Reagan and as a Deputy National Security Adviser in the administration of George W. Bush, where he handled Middle East policy for the White House. His previous book, *Tested by Zion*, is the definitive account of the Bush administration and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and won the Bronze Prize in 2013 from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy as outstanding book of the year on the Middle East. Abrams is a member of the board of the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy.

REALISM AND DEMOCRACY

American Foreign Policy after the Arab Spring

Elliott Abrams

A Council on Foreign Relations Book



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To
Raphael, Maya, Samson, Levi, Lily, Shiloh,
and those to come

The creation of a free society, as the history of existing democracies in the world makes clear, is no easy matter. The experience of the Turkish republic over the last half century and of some other Muslim countries more recently has demonstrated two things: first, that it is indeed very difficult to create a democracy in such a society, and second, that although difficult, it is not impossible.

The study of Islamic history and of the vast and rich Islamic political literature encourages the belief that it may well be possible to develop democratic institutions – not necessarily in our Western definition of that much misused term, but in one deriving from their own history and culture and ensuring, in their way, limited government under law, consultation and openness, in a civilized and humane society. . . .

[T]he forces of tyranny and terror are still very strong and the outcome is far from certain. . . . The war against terror and the quest for freedom are inextricably linked, and neither can succeed without the other. The struggle is no longer limited to one or two countries, as some Westerners still manage to believe. It has acquired first a regional then a global dimension, with profound consequences for all of us.

If freedom fails and terror triumphs, the peoples of Islam will be the first and greatest victims. They will not be alone, and many others will suffer with them.

Bernard Lewis, “Democracy and the Enemies of Freedom,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 22, 2003. Available at www.wsj.com/articles/SB107205654377356100

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Preface

For Arab lands, the first decades of the twenty-first century were the best of times – and the worst of times.

Those old Dickensian lines are a good summary of the “Arab Spring” and its grim aftermath. On December 17, 2010, a Tunisian street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire and spurred a revolt in Tunisia that brought down the twenty-four-year dictatorship of Zine El Abedine Ben Ali less than a month later. Ben Ali fled into exile in Saudi Arabia. The uprisings spread – to Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. In Egypt, where President Hosni Mubarak had ruled since his predecessor’s assassination in 1981, the uprising led to his resignation on February 11, 2011, less than two months after Bouazizi’s self-immolation. In April 2011, Mubarak was arrested and ordered to stand trial. In Yemen, a rebellion began in December 2010 that resulted in the resignation and departure from the country of its president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, in 2011. The fighting soon included a sectarian bid for power by the Houthis and significant foreign military intervention to defeat them. The Libyan dictator, Muammar Qadhafi, faced small protests and tried to put them down with force, but they soon spread into an armed uprising that became a civil war. NATO forces intervened in March 2011, and the capital, Tripoli, fell to rebel forces in August. Qadhafi was killed in the fighting in October 2011. In Syria, President Assad also faced demonstrations, and like Qadhafi, tried to put them down with force. The result has been a bloody conflict, with nearly 500,000 dead, half the population driven from their homes, and millions of refugees in neighboring countries.

The “Arab Spring” also affected the Arab monarchies. After demonstrations began on February 20, 2011, King Mohamed VI of Morocco

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introduced constitutional amendments that he claimed would move the country toward a constitutional monarchy. They were adopted in a national referendum held on July 1, 2011. The late King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia announced a vast spending program of \$130 billion designed to dampen the desire for political reforms. In Bahrain, demonstrations beginning in February 2011 were immediately repressed, and in the following month forces from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other Arab countries intervened to support the monarchy.

When the Arab Spring (henceforth without quotation marks) began, it gave rise to high hopes. Perhaps this would be the end of “Arab exceptionalism,” by which was meant the apparent immunity of Arab states from the expansion of democracy that had been so widespread since the 1970s. In that decade and in the 1980s democracy had spread throughout Latin America, with elected governments replacing military regimes and leaving Communist Cuba a rare exception. In Asia, the military regime in South Korea, the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines, and one-party rule in Taiwan were replaced by democratic governments. The fall of the Soviet Union opened the way to democracy in many countries in the former Soviet space, though obviously not all, and eleven newly free countries entered the EU.

Now, it seemed, the Arabs would join in. “This is the new, democratic Arab world,” Fareed Zakaria wrote in *Time Magazine*.¹ CNN commentators spoke of “the burgeoning democracy movement across the Middle East” that would lead al-Qaeda “to irrelevance.”² In the *New Statesman* in London, the French academic Olivier Roy opined, “The protest movement is both democratic and nationalist and . . . will install governments with greater legitimacy.”³ In the *New York Times*, the former United Nations Under-Secretary-General Jean-Marie Guéhenno wrote, “The Arab revolutions are beginning to destroy the cliché of an Arab world incapable of democratic transformation.”⁴

Optimism was widespread, but since 2011 the global trend in the direction of democracy has appeared, after all, to halt at the frontiers of the Arab world. Even after the Arab Spring, no Arab state has achieved democracy (if indeed it was an accepted goal) with the exception of Tunisia. The fall of their regimes led to years of disorder and violence in Yemen, Syria, and Libya, and in Egypt an elderly general was replaced

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by a middle-aged general who followed the same playbook in repressing and constricting political life – but took it even further.

So disillusion has set in. Daniel Byman of Georgetown University wrote as early as December 2011 that “it is too soon to say that the Arab Spring is gone, never to resurface. But the Arab Winter has clearly arrived” and will bring with it “chaos, stagnation, and misrule.”⁵ By January 2015, Tarek Masoud of Harvard could write an article in the *Journal of Democracy* titled “Has the Door Closed on Arab Democracy?” and there conclude that the widespread optimism had been “stunningly unwarranted.”⁶

The effects of this disillusion and pessimism involve far more than incorrect predictions about the likelihood or timetable for democracy to spread in the Arab world. They also involve American policy toward the region. If democracy is several generations distant, or is indeed impossible and perhaps even undesirable in many places, why should the United States actively support it – and thereby complicate our relations with existing governments that are often valuable allies? Why sacrifice important current relationships for hopeless dreams or, at best, theoretical notions about political change? Even if the goals are good ones, why assume that the United States is positioned to do anything useful and that we really know how to promote progress toward democracy in the Arab world? And why assume that the goal of democracy is sensible in the Arab case, where free elections may bring to power Islamist groups whose values are so different from ours and whose members do not appear to be democrats at all?

Those questions are the subject of this book, whose topic is American foreign policy in the Arab world. I believe that support for Arab democracy should remain an American foreign policy goal. “Arab exceptionalism” surely exists in the sense that there is such a thing as Arab culture and politics, but I will argue that while it presents many tough obstacles to democratization, it does not destroy the possibility of progress. Moreover, the alternative – which is American support for varying forms of dictatorship in which the population is deprived of any real role in the political life of their own country – is inherently unstable. I will also discuss ways in which American support for democracy can be more effective.

The pace of change after the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi left the impression that democracy might come quickly, just as the fall of

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apparently permanent regimes had come so quickly. But it is one thing to dynamite a political structure and another thing to build a new and stable edifice in its place. The failure to achieve or sustain democracy in parts of the former Soviet space teaches this lesson, as do stories like those of Bolivia, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Nicaragua. President George W. Bush used to call the expansion of democracy and the elimination of tyranny “the work of generations,” and in this he was surely correct.

The debate over American support for democracy is often cast in terms of how best to fight terrorism and violent extremism. That will be a long war, and it is argued that surely it is more important for us to win that fight first – and protect ourselves – than it is to seek greater respect for human rights. But repression and tyranny are not a cure for terrorism and violent extremism; they are a contributor to it. Regimes that prevent peaceful political debate and activity strengthen extremist forces and weaken moderate ones. Islamist extremism must be combated with force – but not only with force. Islamists have ideas, and not only their guns but their ideas as well must be defeated. That cannot be accomplished by illegitimate regimes whose only claim to power is brute force.

It is true that a great part of the struggle against Islamist extremism, and perhaps the central part, is a religious debate among Muslims about the meaning of Islam in the twenty-first century. In that debate the U.S. government cannot play a large role. Statements from U.S. presidents that “Islam is a religion of peace” will never have any impact, nor should they: who is an American politician to define the true meaning of any religion, much less one he or she does not practice? Persuading Muslims to embrace an Islam that insists on respect for human rights and political democracy and rejects extremism and violence is critical – but only Muslims can enter that debate with other Muslims and hope to win it.

In the Arab world, the American role in that war of ideas is different; it is about politics rather than religion. The issue facing American policy makers is not how rapid but sustainable change can be achieved in Arab nations; that prospect is very unlikely and in any event is not susceptible to American control. The question facing the United States is whether to abandon support for democracy, and therefore for democratic activists,

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in Arab countries or perhaps to abandon it in any sense except the delivery of lip service. Must we, should we, choose sides in a struggle that will be long and complicated and cause us trouble with rulers who might otherwise be useful allies? My own answer is yes, for practical as well as moral reasons.

The notion that the United States should actively work to expand the frontiers of democracy across the globe is not self-evident, nor has it always characterized American foreign policy. When I became politically conscious and active in the late 1960s and early 1970s, at the height of the Cold War, support for human rights and democracy was a controversial subject – pressed in various ways by the Soviet Jewry movement and groups such as Freedom House, and resisted strongly by the Nixon administration on *realpolitik* grounds. Working for the late Senators Henry M. Jackson and Daniel P. Moynihan, and then in the Reagan and George W. Bush administrations, I had a ringside seat to many of these debates and then climbed into the ring myself.

So this book begins with the story of how modern American human rights policy developed – as I saw it and joined the fray. And then we turn to the Arab Spring and the current debate over the proper role of democracy in American policy in the Middle East.

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Since leaving the government in 2009 I have been a senior fellow for Middle Eastern Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), the perfect place for writing this book or any other. I thank the Council's President Richard Haass and Director of Studies James Lindsay for their advice and support during all my time at CFR and during the writing of this book.

While I was drafting the manuscript and reviewing written materials, Ari Heistein and then Zachary Shapiro were my research assistants at the Council, and they deserve my thanks for their valuable help and unfailing good cheer.

My thinking about the issues discussed in this book has benefited greatly from the work of many others – scholars, current and former officials, and friends – in Washington and the Middle East. Worthy of special mention are those working at the National Endowment for Democracy, on whose board I serve; fellow members of the Egypt Working Group in Washington; and my colleagues at the Council on Foreign Relations.

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