

*Part I*

Introduction and Argument

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## 1 Introduction

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A decade has now passed since protests in the Middle East captured the attention and imagination of audiences around the world. The story of how those protests began is now familiar to most, but it is no less striking to recall. On December 17, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a fruit seller in the central Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid, set himself on fire after enduring harassment from local police. Bouazizi's action quickly sparked a wave of protests throughout the country, finding deep resonance among thousands of Tunisians frustrated by mounting corruption, exclusion, diminished opportunity, and the seeming indifference of their regime. Those protests soon spread beyond Tunisia to cities throughout the Arab world, tapping into similar grievances among citizens vis-à-vis their respective regimes and fronting a major challenge to decades of authoritarian rule. In the span of three months, four long-standing authoritarian leaders were forced from power. The initial euphoria felt by many in the region existed alongside a sense of trepidation about the changes to come both from those eager for change and from those with a stake in preserving the preexisting order. In the years since 2011, that euphoria has been tempered, and the different paths since taken by states are testament both to the difficulties of change and to the struggle of challenging the logic and structure of authoritarianism in the region.

With the initial dust of the uprisings now settled, scholars and analysts have stepped back to reflect critically on the motivations driving protestors and to make sense of the ways in which economic and political factors shaped participation in the 2011 protests. In the heady first months of the uprisings, many scholars and analysts of the region and those watching from afar found it easy to impart their own desires of what they wanted the protests to be and represent, often ignoring earlier histories of protests and geopolitical realities that might obscure their portrait. Early narratives described the protests as demands for dignity, a youth revolt, or expressions against injustices, inequality, and indignities wrought by authoritarian regimes.

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Comparisons to 1989 and the revolutions in Eastern Europe were made as well; the symbolic allure was difficult to ignore. Analysts and journalists often sought to find elegant parallels between that era and the shock it then represented to the international system and the monumental changes seemingly underway in the Arab world. Questions also extended to asking whether international support, particularly that from the United States, played an instrumental role in the 2011 uprisings as it had for civil society groups in Europe in the years preceding the collapse of the Soviet Union. The question, on the surface, was not illogical. From 1990 to 2010, the United States alone spent more than \$2 billion on efforts to promote democracy in the Arab world. While most of that aid was directed to Iraq in the wake of the United States' 2003 invasion, funds were also distributed to other states throughout the region.

Attempts to link that aid cleanly to protests in the Middle East were met with challenges. Initial reports noted that many of the protestors who played an active role in organizing and participating in protests, such as members of Egypt's April 6 movement, attended conferences outside Egypt with support from the quasi-governmental US organization, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Others observed that in Tunisia, where protests began, the president had forbidden all US democracy programs. The difficulty of neatly ascribing the 2011 uprisings to that aid reflects a more complicated story that challenges the way we think about the origins and foundations of the protests and the ways in which US democracy programs evolved in the region, and what those programs supported. This book tells that story.

### **Democracy Aid in the Middle East**

The origins of this book extend just over a decade ago to doctoral research I first began in Egypt. In 2007, I arrived in Cairo curious to understand and examine the politics of US democracy aid in the Middle East, but particularly in Egypt. My curiosity was driven initially by new scholarship on the efficacy of democracy aid, as well as by lively discussions in Cairo with aid practitioners, activists, and diplomats engaged with such aid. At the time, the question of whether international actors could promote democracy drew growing interest from scholars. This interest reflected the elevated position democracy aid programs had begun to assume within the foreign policies of predominantly Western governments and the growth of actors such as for- and not-for-profit organizations, contractors, academic institutions, and domestic and

international organizations comprising what scholars have referred to as a “democracy industry” or “democracy establishment.”<sup>1</sup>

Since 1990, the United States has spent more than \$8 billion toward efforts to promote democracy worldwide.<sup>2</sup> Scholars interested in understanding the impact and effectiveness of such aid soon expanded, applying sophisticated methods to explore the link between democracy and democratization. In 2005, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the primary US agency managing such aid, commissioned a cross-national quantitative study to assess the effectiveness of its spending for democracy in its programs worldwide from 1990 to 2005.<sup>3</sup> The study was the first to distinguish aid for democracy from that of general foreign assistance and concluded that spending for democracy “works.”<sup>4</sup> Subsequent studies using similar methods and data also concluded that democracy aid may enhance democratization in recipient states.<sup>5</sup> Findings from those studies though did not seem to resonate with the experience of states receiving such aid in the Middle East. Indeed, the authors of the USAID-commissioned study found that obligations had the largest effects in Asia and Africa and that democracy funding mattered “in ‘difficult contexts’ with the Middle East as the exception to this general pattern.”<sup>6</sup>

What might explain this exception? For nearly two decades, the United States devoted more than \$2 billion on democracy promotion efforts in

<sup>1</sup> Robert Springborg, “The Democratization Industry and the Middle East,” *Paper presented at the Inaugural Professorial Lecture*, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London, May 24, 2005; Sarah Sunn Bush, *The Taming of Democracy Assistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Steven E. Finkel, Anibal Pérez-Liñán, Mitchell A. Seligson, and C. Neal Tate, “Deepening Our Understanding of the Effects of U.S. Foreign Assistance on Democracy Building: Final Report” (2008), [https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PNADL961.pdf](https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADL961.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Results from that study were also published in *World Politics*: 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, no. 3 (2007).

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Knack, “Does Foreign Aid Promote Democracy?,” *International Studies Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (2004); Jakob Svensson, “Aid, Growth, and Democracy,” *Economics & Politics* 11, no. 3 (1999); Sarantis Kalyvitis and Irene Vlachaki, “When Does More Aid Imply Less Democracy? An Empirical Examination,” *European Journal of Political Economy* 28, no. 1 (2012); Joseph Wright, “How Foreign Aid Can Foster Democratization in Authoritarian Regimes,” *American Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 3 (2009).

<sup>5</sup> James M. Scott and Carie A. Steele, “Sponsoring Democracy: The United States and Democracy Aid to the Developing World, 1988–2001,” *International Studies Quarterly* 55 (2011); Sarantis Kalyvitis and Irene Vlachaki, “Democratic Aid and the Democratization of Recipients,” *Contemporary Economic Policy* 28, no. 2 (2010).

<sup>6</sup> Steven E. Finkel, Anibal Pérez-Liñán, Mitchell A. Seligson, and C. Neal Tate, “Effects of U.S. Foreign Assistance on Democracy Building: Results of a Cross-National Quantitative Study” (2006), [https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/Pnade694.pdf](https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pnade694.pdf).

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the Middle East. This amount marked a significant shift in funding levels from the previous decade and reflected the Bush administration's contention after the attacks of September 11, 2001, that democracy aid was a necessary tool to combat extremism, and hence terrorism. Rhetorically and financially, democracy support soon surpassed that of previous administrations and featured prominently in the United States' National Security Strategy for the first time. New initiatives were launched to augment preexisting democracy programs administered by government agencies like USAID.<sup>7</sup>

That security issues may be part of the story would come as little surprise to scholars and observers of politics in the region. Recent work by scholars Jason Brownlee, Sheila Carapico, and Amaney Jamal relays how democracy programs in the Middle East were often subordinated to strategic concerns, particularly in states like Egypt.<sup>8</sup> Strategic imperatives have long shaped the United States' relationship with states in the region. Securing access to oil and cooperation on issues like counterterrorism often resulted in uncomfortable, if mutually beneficial, arrangements between the United States and authoritarian regimes that were maintained through extensive military and economic assistance.

Understanding why democracy aid efforts may have been limited raised a more pointed question that extends beyond states in the Middle East and one that was curiously absent from scholarly examinations of such aid: Why would an authoritarian regime even allow or tolerate such programs? After all, democracy assistance programs, according to one of the foremost scholars of the field, fundamentally aim to challenge the structure of power within a recipient state.<sup>9</sup> Beyond this puzzle, other fascinating questions soon followed in the early stages of my research in Egypt and later, in Morocco. A marked disconnect existed between the actors and issues engaged at the "high" and "low" levels of democracy aid. Rhetorically, and in practice, many diplomats

<sup>7</sup> Thomas O. Melia, "The Democracy Bureaucracy: The Infrastructure of American Democracy Promotion," in *Paper prepared for the Princeton Project on National Security Working Group on Global Institutions and Foreign Policy Infrastructure* (2005), [https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/pcaac238.pdf](https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pcaac238.pdf), 14. From 2000 to 2005, democracy aid funding increased from \$500 million to more than \$2 billion. Melia notes that a significant percentage of this figure included spending for activities in Afghanistan and Iraq.

<sup>8</sup> Jason Brownlee, *Democracy Prevention: The Politics of the U.S.-Egyptian Alliance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Sheila Carapico, *Political Aid and Arab Activism: Democracy Promotion, Justice, and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Amaney A. Jamal, *Of Empires and Citizens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999).

and democracy activists were devoting significant effort to promoting democracy and reform in the region. Those efforts though seldom seemed to make much of a difference on the ground.

Outside diplomatic discussions and those held by democracy aid advocates in conferences abroad, actors on the ground contested both the form and the function of democracy aid projects. A wide divergence also often existed between the conception of democracy held and advanced by outside actors and those for whom such aid was ostensibly directed. In lively conversations with local activists, aid practitioners – both local and international – diplomats, and democracy aid recipients, I heard profoundly different ideas and understandings about the approach and meaning of democracy underlying aid efforts. The meaning of democracy was not inconsequential to many of the Egyptians and Moroccans with whom I spoke, nor were the power differentials that came in negotiating aid projects with international partners. Despite the variety of approaches and understandings of democracy, very narrow conceptions of that term often prevailed.

Audits of democracy projects commissioned by USAID to assess how its democracy projects were working would often conclude that they were ineffective and, in many cases, counterproductive. Yet, despite repeated evidence and learning that such projects were problematic, and even counterproductive, they continued with little change in composition. These early observations and questions suggested a far greater complexity to the politics and practice of democracy aid than that conveyed in the existing scholarship on such aid. In this book, I argue that answering them requires a more complex consideration of the relations between the United States and recipient regimes in the region as well as the voices and practices of the actors involved.

### **The Argument in Brief**

This book is about the construction and practice of democracy aid in the Middle East. In order to understand these questions and puzzles, I argue for a different approach than that used in existing research on democracy aid. To understand why such aid may have had a limited impact in the region, it is important to examine how democracy aid programs were constructed, negotiated, and executed over time. Doing so allows us to open the aperture on the actors and institutions engaged in such aid to explore the motivations and interests shaping aid efforts. I tackle these questions by advancing a political economy framework that considers how ideas, interests, and institutions mediate and shape the form and function of democracy aid programs. I develop this framework to

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examine the design and implementation of past efforts in Egypt and Morocco, two of the highest recipients of US democracy aid in the Middle East. In doing so, I show how and why US democracy aid programs have done little to challenge the structure of power in the region. Leveraging over a decade of field and archival research in the Middle East and Washington, DC, I argue that previous studies have paid insufficient attention to the fact that democracy aid programs are often negotiated deals. Recipient governments can, and do, help craft their design.

The implications of my argument are significant for the literature on democracy aid and authoritarian durability. One major implication is that the agency and the strategic behavior of recipient states may explain the null effects of democracy aid in some countries. I show that because authoritarian regimes may choose how to accept aid, democracy aid may reward economic interests tied to incumbent regimes. By consequence of such bargaining, programs that appear to scholars as reform minded may instead enable regimes. Rather than promote democracy, such aid may perversely undermine it. In Egypt and Morocco, democracy programs were framed in terms of their benefit to the economy. This orientation reflected an institutional preference in the United States for a market-oriented democracy as well as a strategy to sell democracy programs to resistant regimes. Since the early 1990s, both states have been able to appropriate elements of democracy aid to bolster their control over society, for example, by using support for civil society to help fulfill government social welfare functions. US programs aiming to promote democracy often reinforced structures they intended to challenge.

My findings suggest that dependency matters in understanding an authoritarian regime's ability to challenge democracy aid programs, but that it is contingent on the availability of other potential patrons to act as a surrogate for donor aid. Beyond suggesting evidence of the limits of linkage politics and foreign aid, this book illuminates why democracy efforts have been limited through both the conceptualization of democracy promoted and the subsequent dilutions regimes were able to make to aid programs.

Examining the construction and practice of democracy aid, I argue, also illuminates the politics of such aid beyond just the level of donor and recipient governments. Previous studies of democracy aid say little about how such aid is constructed, allocated, and executed. My framework shows why particular ideas about democracy win out by examining the practice of democracy aid in the Middle East and in Washington, DC. In both Egypt and Morocco, the ideas about democracy that ultimately prevailed in programs were those reflecting the security imperatives of



the United States and recipient regimes, despite significant contestation over its meaning by locals and practitioners in the field as well as bureaucrats in Washington, DC.

Through archival research and interviews with practitioners, diplomats, activists, and contractors, this book is the first to offer insight into the black box of relations between donor and recipient governments and civil society. I show the evolution of what were rich discussions and debates about how to orient democracy programs in the region. I explain why certain ideas about democracy persist and how those ideas were sustained, challenged, and reinforced by particular interests and institutions to favor donor and recipient governments over local civil society. I also show why those ideas are unlikely to change given the institutional incentives governing actors engaged in democracy promotion. By focusing on the practice and construction of democracy aid, this book contributes to a more enriched understanding of the processes and mechanisms at work on both recipient and donor ends, which scholars note has been underdeveloped in the democracy and civil society aid scholarship.<sup>10</sup>

### Studying and Theorizing Democracy Aid

My argument for a political economy approach in understanding the limited impact of democracy aid in the Middle East challenges dominant approaches to the study of such aid. Over the last decade, scholars have become increasingly interested in understanding how foreign aid, and particularly that for democracy, can promote democratization. Important studies such as that commissioned by USAID have employed sophisticated research designs with cross-national data to determine whether and how aid for democracy might work.<sup>11</sup> Though methodologically sophisticated, the actual politics embedded within democracy promotion is often absent from such studies. Indeed, one of the limitations for aggregate cross-national studies is their inability to give sufficient attention to the form or structure of democracy aid programs, the context in which

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Heiss and Judith Green Kelley, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: International NGOs and the Dual Pressures of Donors and Host Governments," *Journal of Politics* 79, no. 2 (2017).

<sup>11</sup> Scott and Steele, "Sponsoring Democracy"; Finkel et al., "Effects of U.S. Foreign Assistance"; Burcu Savun and Daniel C. Tirone, "Foreign Aid, Democratization, and Civil Conflict: How Does Democracy Aid Affect Civil Conflict?," *American Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 2 (2011).

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they were executed, and the negotiations between both donor and recipient states.<sup>12</sup>

Evaluating the impact of democracy programs on democracy – a contested concept in itself – has also been a notoriously thorny endeavor for both scholars and aid practitioners. Institutional and bureaucratic pressures by donor agencies and other aid organizations to produce results often involve compromises and trade-offs to generate numbers at the expense of more nuanced understandings of the indirect and time-delayed effects of such aid. For example, one of the most common measures used by scholars to assess progress on democracy is the ordinal scale developed by the advocacy group Freedom House. Ordinal measures like the Freedom House Index (FHI) though often mask complex changes within states receiving aid and relay a superficial understanding of reform trajectories.<sup>13</sup> Scholars using the FHI and similar indices have acknowledged the problems and limitations inherent with such measures yet continue to use them in their research.

Viewed through the prism of analytics sites like Google Scholar and the Web of Science, the dominance of both the FHI and Polity IV, another democracy index used by scholars, is clear. As Michael Coppedge and John Gerring observe, scholars cite the former thousands and the latter hundreds of times.<sup>14</sup> To be sure, trade-offs may exist with particular methods and the reflexive use of such indices. Those trade-offs, I argue, have consequences. Democracy aid studies that use such approaches can assume a certain velocity that may narrow and define the way scholars see, study, and conceptualize democracy. Disciplinary pressures within political science may act as a disincentive to challenge this view and speak in terms other than that defined through the analytically clear, if shallow, neatness of such indices. Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink have observed this dimension in their research on international norms, noting

<sup>12</sup> For example, data used in the USAID study on democracy aid was organized by dollar amount and divided by which component of democracy it fell under (aid for governance, civil society, elections, rule of law) and was compiled solely by the study's Democracy Fellow working at USAID. Details about program and project descriptions, grants, contractors, and recipients though were not included. Author's email correspondence with Andrew Green, USAID Democracy Fellow, Spring 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Carl Henrik Knutsen, "Measuring Effective Democracy," *International Political Science Review* 31, no. 2 (2010). For a nuanced discussion on the different indices and problems in measuring democracy, see Michael Coppedge and John Gerring, "Conceptualizing and Measuring Democracy: A New Approach," *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 2 (2011). For a thoughtful counter to this argument, see Ilya Lozovsky, "Freedom by the Numbers," *Foreign Policy*, January 29, 2016. See also Sarah Sunn Bush, "The Politics of Rating Freedom: Ideological Affinity, Private Authority, and the Freedom in the World Ratings," *Perspectives on Politics* 15, no. 3 (2017).

<sup>14</sup> Coppedge and Gerring, "Conceptualizing and Measuring Democracy," 248.