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AND THE WEST

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This paper takes into consideration two main issues: (a) the status of the debate on Arab democracy and its weak dynamics; (b) the role of the West in fostering or promoting democracy in the Arab world. It concludes by providing some recommendations about the appropriate framework in which a credible and more effective Western policy to promote democracy in the Arab world can be pursued and shared by the parties involved.

The mixed record of democratisation in the Arab world

Many Arab countries have experienced a degree of political liberalism at some point in their contemporary history - most notably Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, and Syria. But none of these experiences has given rise to full-fledged democratic systems, which are in any case a recent and precarious achievement anywhere in the world. Nevertheless the debate about and actual experience of liberalism has a long and diverse history in the Arab countries and cannot be started "from scratch" [Hourani 1962; Binder 1988]. The first Arab experience with liberalism was in the constitutionalist era under Ottoman dominance (1870s-1910s); the second was with parliamentarism under colonial dominance (1920s-1950s). Later on, some countries - particularly Egypt - experienced different waves of political liberalisation and de-liberalisation.

 A third and much debated "liberal age" started from around the end of the 1980s and is still in progress. From that date, most Arab countries adopted a few more liberal policies in the political and economic domain - often conceded under popular and international pressure - that contributed to giving the impression of a widened public sphere or, as it was more often phrased, of an Arab world in transition to democracy. From the second half of the 1990s to present, however, the new more liberal policies have been stalled, withdrawn or circumvented in most countries and it has became apparent that Arab regimes have failed to democratise and, in some cases, have become even more repressive and unaccountable.

There is now a growing consensus that it was wrong in most cases to classify recent changes in Arab political regimes as a "transition to democracy" [Salamé 1993; Ayyubi 1995; Korany 1998; Schlumberger 2000], at least in the more technical sense [Carothers 2002]. Significant change did indeed take place in Arab regimes, but it consisted of a modernisation of authoritarianism demanded by fiscal and legitimacy crises coupled with globalisation pressures [Albrecht, Schlumberger 2003]. This change seems to have given rise to a hybrid kind of regime variously known as "semi-authoritarianism" or "liberalised autocracy" [Ottaway 2003a; Brumberg 2003]. Ruled by modernised elites able to manipulate façade democratic institutions in order to stay in power, liberalised autocracies now exist in Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait and Bahrain

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alongside the more "traditional" secular or religious authoritarian regimes in Syria, Tunisia, Libya and Saudi Arabia.

In other words, in today's Arab world there are neither democratic systems nor democratising regimes, there are instead many kinds of autocracies, each functioning differently within the general framework of authoritarianism. For instance, in all liberalised autocracies there is a similar trend of ruling elites coopting new social segments to control the privatising economy according to a pattern dubbed "from plan to clan"; the trend may be similar, but the beneficiary groups are different and differently aggregated from country to country [Ayyubi 1995, pp. 403-409; Ferrié 2003, pp. 22-29].

There is also a growing consensus on the fact that the entrenched regimes of liberalised autocracies represent a new obstacle to democratisation in the Arab world [Albrecht, Schlumberger 2003; Brumberg 2003] which adds to the main ones, traditionally being identified as regional conflict, foreign dominance, socio-economic underdevelopment and political culture.

The record of Western efforts to promote political change in the Arab countries

Western efforts to bring about political reform in the Arab countries have a long history, whose first episode took place in the wake of World War I, when Wilsonian principles of self-determination fed the British-fomented Arab revolt. The second episode was in colonial times, when colonial powers declared a mission of political civilisation - with or without a mandate from the League of Nations. The third episode came during the Cold War years, when Western countries pressured, boycotted and ousted pro-Soviet Arab regimes to protect and expand the "free world" sphere of influence.

The policies for democracy promotion in the Middle East inaugurated by Western countries in the early 1990s and the present US drive for regime change are part of this long sequence. But they differ deeply from one another. As will be argued in the following sections, while democracy promotion policies are consistent with the substantive meaning of democracy, the imposition of regime change is clearly incompatible with the spirit of democracy.

Historically, Western efforts to bring about political change in the Arab world have always been motivated by a strategic vision and more short-term political interests (on which the US and the Europeans often differed) embedded in an ideological platform. As it will be argued, current Western policies to promote democracy in the Arab world follow this same pattern, with the assumption that the significant difference between now and colonial times is that the political regimes preferred by the West today are also those preferred by the majority of the Arab peoples. This assumption cannot be taken for granted and, to the contrary, the consistency between Western preferences and those of deeply divided Arab societies remain dubious. As a consequence, Western policies are not that easy to implement.

A useful precedent to focus present predicaments is the anti-Ottoman alliance between the pan-Arab nationalist elites of the Arab provinces, the Hashemite tribal aristocracy and the (British and French) allied powers. The short-lived Arab Kingdom established in Damascus wanted to be "civil, constitutional, decentralised and protect the rights of minorities"[1] and, on its behalf, Feisal signed (6 January 1919) an agreement with Chaim Weizman accepting the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Thus for a few

precious years the political objectives of local Arab elites and Western powers converged and were supported by some common political values: nationalism, self-determination, liberalism and peaceful conflict resolution. But in 1920 the convergence ended, because Western powers found the Arabs "not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world" and established the mandates.[2] However, the history of the Western role in the "Arab awakening" [Antonious 1938] is still relevant and tells us that the combination of anti-*status quo* Western powers and emerging Arab elites is a recipe "to win the hearts and minds" of Middle Eastern peoples, when it is based on compatible political goals and shared political values.

Is this the case today? What are the shared goals and values that currently underpin Western requests for political reform in the Arab countries? Where are the Arab elites that can credibly lead the reform process? While some argue that Arab public opinion simply does not matter [Ajami 2003] others see a potential partner for Western efforts in the "new Arab public sphere" who express itself in Arab transnational media (from the Internet to al-Jazeera) [Lynch 2003].

In any case, today the recipe is more difficult to implement: not only are the interests of Western powers divided, but the only organised anti-*status quo* groups in Arab societies seem to be the Islamists. Moreover Western countries and especially the US have a "strong credibility gap" as democratises [Ottaway 2003b] because of their long-standing support for Arab autocracies -which has not ended with 9/11 and the Iraq war [Carothers 2003; MERIP 2003]-, their double standards in managing regional security (from regional conflicts to nuclear proliferation), and the perceived instrumental use of democracy promotion to pressure regimes failing to fall in line with Western policy requests .[3]

Political reform towards what kind of democracy?

Local political activism, intellectual debates and even opinion polls confirm that there is a clear demand for democracy in the Arab world.[4] On the other hand, democracy is the final goal envisaged by democracy promotion policies adopted by the US and the EU since the early 1990s [Carothers 2000; Gillespie 2002; Bicchi forthcoming]. The apparent convergence of Arab and Western demand of democracy disappears, however, when it comes to the meaning and content of democracy, let alone the ways, timing and responsibility for democratisation. If democracy is indeed to become a shared goal for Western and Arab elites, some clarification is in order.

The debate about the meaning of democracy in the Arab (and Muslim) world at large is often deadlocked by arguments and counterarguments about the cultural compatibility between Islamic and democratic values, a debate interlocking with the political dilemmas about "allowing" the Islamists into electoral competition or "letting" Western values contaminate local authenticity. Although necessary, these debates are loaded with beliefs and political preferences and, therefore, perpetuate ideological biases and do not help to forge a common ground. They contribute more to creating Middle East exceptionalism than overcoming it.

Possibly a less value-loaded approach is to conceptualise democracy as an entity composed of two distinct elements: "freedom from" and "freedom to" [Sartori 1995][5]. The former means freedom from tyranny and consists primarily of the structural and legal means to limit and control the exercise of power. It equates with the form of

liberal constitutionalism. The latter is what an empowered people "wills and demands", that is the actual policy contents processed through the liberal democratic political form. The liberal constitutional form -that is the unique blend of institutions and procedures that guarantees the substantive exercise of the "freedom to"- is the universally exportable element. This is because the core support for the liberal political form does not come from Western concepts of individual freedom and rights but from a universal *harm-avoidance aspiration* (i.e. to be free from harm to one's life, health and well-being). Instead, country specific contingencies and cultural beliefs play a greater role in determining what is to be decided (that is: contents); therefore the "freedom to" component of democracy cannot be the same everywhere.

If these postulates are acceptable, then the respect of both components of democracy is the acid test for Western efforts to promote democratisation in the Arab world and offer a frame of reference for some of the policy dilemmas that have hindered democratisation in the Arab countries. For instance, a consistent response to Islamic political activism exists, although it is not simple: politically, it requires the integration of Islamists subscribing to democratic rules in a truly pluralistic political game (guarantee of the "freedom from")[Guazzone 1995; Hudson 1995][6]; culturally, it requires the development of Islamic values into policy contents to be processed through the liberal political form (guarantee of the "freedom to"). The latter process will inevitably be long - as always in the cultural realm - but it is already under way[7] and, if an effort is really to be made to promote a liberal Islamic alternative, needs to be realistically supported by the West - as it was the case with Europe's involvement in Khatami's "Dialogue of civilisations".

Finally, the conceptualisation of democracy as a composed entity allows for a better approach to sequencing and timing in democratisation. As Sartori notes, nations coming to democratisation late are disadvantaged since they are expected to "catch up" quickly and fully. Historically, however, it cannot be overlooked that liberalism predates mass democracy by about two centuries. This does not mean that Arab liberals will have to wait that long, but it means that political reform should concentrate on democracy fundamentals and not waste efforts on mimicking Western policies. In the case of today's Arab countries, the shared goal of Western and Arab democratises should be to build country-tailored processes of political reform that ensure liberal constitutionalism in its contemporary variant, i.e. measured by the eight constitutional guarantees defined by Robert Dahl.[8]

The rationale for democracy promotion and double standards

Against this backdrop, how can a credible and effective Western policy of democratisation be construed? To respond to this question, one can start by asking what it is that gives rise to Western democratic activism today. Why is the West promoting democracy so actively in the Arab world (and elsewhere) - whether it be true democracy or not? In the past, Western efforts to introduce political change in the Arab countries had ideological as well as political motives. Today, while the ideological motives may be similar to those of the past (Wilsonian principles, "civilisation", modernity, and now democracy), the political motives are obviously different.

If we look at political motives, we see that Western policies to promote democracy are predicated on the strong belief that the expansion of democracy in the world works as a

strategic factor in strengthening international security and prosperity, globally and, in particular, for the West. The argument is that democratic regimes, replacing authoritarian (broadly corrupt and incompetent) ones, would be inherently bent on liberalising economies and conducting co-operative, non-aggressive foreign policies.

Thus, the policies to promote democracy have an idealistic background. At the same time, they promote substantive interests. To a large extent, the nexus between democracy and security is an argument stemming from the importance assumed in the Western world by liberal and neo-liberal theories of international relations as opposed to conventional realism. However, governments happen to use the idealistic rationale of liberal and neo-liberal theories as an ideological vehicle to pursue their real and conventional interests. This interplay of idealism and realism affects many Western policies. In particular, however, it affects those devoted to promoting democracy by embedding in them a drift towards double standard.

If we now go back to the question of building a credible and effective Western policy to promote democracy, two points deserve consideration: (a) the double standard inherent in these policies, just mentioned; (b) the extent to which the basic nexus between democracy and security (prosperity and peace) really works.

What the previous sections suggest is that, in order to be credible and effective, the West should abstain from holding a double-standard attitude towards the Arab world and, more in general, non-Western countries. Double standards can take different forms. With respect to democratisation, one important form is support for the stability of authoritarian regimes vs. support to democratic reform. Another significant form of double standard concerns support to democratic constitutionalism while opposing the substantive choices democratic institutions may bring about.

If we limit ourselves to commenting on the latter form of double standard, it is clear that in order to gain credibility and become more convincing, Western policies of democracy promotion should in principle respect both elements of democracy: the institutional element (the institutional forms to achieve consensus) as well as the political one (values and goals that peoples choose by means of constitutional forms).

Western activism to introduce liberal constitutionalism - more broadly speaking, pluralist and liberal polities - seems acceptable and is likely to be welcomed by people in the Arab countries. By the same token, the support the West provides to non-liberal, authoritarian regimes to foster its political interest in short-term stability does not seem acceptable and may easily be in contradiction with the alleged aim of promoting democracy.

By contrast, Western activism aimed at introducing values and goals because of their reputed democratic significance is not acceptable. This activism can hurt, delay or prevent transitions to democracy. Doubtless, it may well happen that there is coincidence or convergence between values and goals, as in the case previously pointed out of the short-lived Damascus Arab Kingdom. If this convergence or coincidence is not there, however, Western activism can only complicate rather than solve problems. From another perspective, it is clear that attaining coincidence or convergence is a fundamental political and diplomatic goal in order to couple democratisation in the Arab countries with security in the West.

In conclusion, the main political requirement for the credibility of Western democratises in the Arab world is to respect both components of democracy, not only the "freedom from" element. Imposition of the type of regime to be achieved, the specific stages to reach or the contents to be achieved is not respectful of liberal political form. Thus, for

instance, the acquiescence of European powers in the Algerian coup of 1992 had nothing to do with democracy promotion, nor does the preventive exclusion of the Islamist component from the political reconstruction of Iraq or the imposition of a trusteeship on Palestine [Indyk 2003]. In the same perspective, "regime change" as enforced in Iraq with the spring 2003 military campaign is by definition a policy that, at least from a normative point of view, is not respectful of liberal political form and substance.

Democracy and security: checking nexuses

The Western argument linking democracy to security is predicated on a set of nexuses that basically suggests that a democratic regime will, by its very nature, be at peace with other countries and thus pursue liberal policies in the economic as well as other fields. These nexuses cannot be taken for granted. They need to be qualified and are, in fact, still being debated by international relations theorists with no firm results.

In any case, the conclusions pointed out in the previous section suggest that the same democratic form can legitimately bring about different choices and promote different goals and values. While these different choices have to be respected from a normative point of view in order to make Western policies of democracy promotion credible, they can collide with security, the early mover of Western policies to promote democracy. Western support for authoritarian regimes, lest undemocratic Islamist extremism becomes empowered, and strong hesitations in implementing conditionality are examples of how Western security and its democracy promotion can collide. Thus, the nexus between democracy and security requires elaboration. This nexus is at the heart of the matter and deserves throughout consideration. In this paper, we will limit ourselves to a few points.

In its essence, democracy remains what it came to be in Athens during the fifth century B.C. , that is a way to solve conflict and overcome the polarised world of tragedy through the use of dialectics. Conceptually, however, the basic aim of a domestic democratic regime to solve conflict peacefully and the foreign policy of this same regime are not the same thing. A democratic regime is by definition dedicated finding a peaceful resolution of domestic conflict in the polity by means of appropriate dialectical means, widespread checks and controls, guarantees and freedoms as well as by building up capabilities. Not necessarily, though, is it also dedicated to peace and co-operation abroad. External conflict may even be functional to solving internal ones. By the same token, there is no stringent relationship between the democratic character of a nation and its aggressiveness, its desire to dominate or to use violent means to assert its own perceived interests abroad. In principle, democracies in themselves are not inherently peaceful. In this sense it would be wrong to believe that if a country becomes democratic it becomes peaceful as well. A democracy moved by strong nationalist feelings, as many European countries were before the First World War, may even be less co-operative and peaceful internationally than an authoritarian regime, like today's Egypt.

Nonetheless, it would be wrong to overlook that there is a correlation between domestic democracy and peace. Still, it comes from two relatively recent developments that took place in the West because of the interplay of a number of factors, particularly in Western Europe after the end of the Second World War. The approximation of Western

Europe to Kant's model of *pax perpetua* does not stem only from the emergence of democratic regimes in individual European countries, but also from the virtuous combination of developments in domestic democracy, liberal economy and international institutions. It may be that the American umbrella - supposedly allowing Europe to become a "paradise" of political irresponsibility (as conservative American thinkers now say to redefine what François Dûchène construed as the emergence of a "civilian power") - has to be added to the equation. Whatever the true substance, the European experience provides the right framework for correlating democracy and security, in that it stresses the need for the simultaneous emergence of domestic democracy, economic liberalisation and international law.

Returning to our topic, if the right correlation is the one just pointed out, this means that Western policies to promote democracy in the Arab world should promote, at one and the same time, economic liberalisation and the strengthening of international organisations in an integrated policy blueprint. In this perspective, failing to comply with international law is another case of double standard: it damages the credibility of Western policies to promote democracy, weakens liberals in the Arab countries and reinforces public support for authoritarian regimes. In conclusion, the establishment of democracies domestically is a necessary but not sufficient condition for implementing what is called "democratic peace" (democracy in an inter-state context) between the West and the Arab world - or the Third world more generally. Democracy must be connected to a set of international conditions, in particular the strengthening of a cosmopolitan legal organisation. In isolation, the promotion of democracy cannot succeed and, consequently, cannot deliver security to the West.

Another correlation that deserves to be taken into account is the one between democracy and ideologies such as nationalism or socialism. As already said, a strongly nationalist democracy may not be a positive factor for international co-operation. Whether dressed up as democratic or authoritarian, nationalism has played a fundamental role, for instance, in Europe's political dynamics between the two World Wars and was the source of disastrous conflicts in that region.

There are plenty of examples in contemporary international relations of situations in which policies to promote change, reconstruction and democracy are frustrated by the lack of a political solution to the national conflict (Kosovo, Bosnia, historical Palestine). While the establishment of a democratic regime can broadly help conflict resolution to emerge, the dynamics of democratisation may be seriously obstructed unless a political solution to the conflict is found. In this sense, while the West (and Israel) generally sees the lack of democracy in the Arab countries and Palestine as the main cause of the Israeli-Palestinian (and Arab) conflict, to a large extent the reverse is true: a political solution to the conflict would help democracy emerge in the region and, on the other hand, render Israeli democracy less nationalist.

In general, democracy promotion will be facilitated by successful negotiations on national conflicts, just as conflict resolution will be facilitated by successful political reform. However, democracy promotion should not be regarded directly as a conflict resolution tool. While democracy has to be promoted in the longer term in the framework of conflict prevention, outstanding conflicts must be tackled in the short term with conflict resolution policies. There can be interplay between longer and shorter-term conflict prevention and resolution. In terms of security, however, the West should not confuse the various instruments and timeframes.

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Conclusions

There is consensus that trends towards democracy in the Arab world are weak. According to analysts, the West is contributing to that weakness by pursuing ambiguous policies of democracy promotion. At the end of the day, these policies do more to promote the stability of the authoritarian regimes presently in power than to promote democracy. Hence the need to rethink Western policies aimed at promoting democracy in the Arab world.

In this perspective, this paper has tried to set out a normative view on democracy promotion to make this policy more credible and acceptable to the parties concerned – consequently, more feasible and effective.

The paper discusses two main features of Western democracy promotion policies: (a) the need to avoid double standards; (b) the need to consider democracy promotion in a wider context of conflict prevention vs. conflict resolution.

In relation to the former, the paper holds that Western policies should be aimed at consolidating and promoting constitutional forms, while abstaining from interfering when those forms bring about choices predicated on values and goals different from those expected or preferred by the West. This attitude is fundamental to prevent a double standard and its multiple manifestations. In other words, in order to rebuild their credibility as democratisers, what Western countries need is a more transparent articulation of the nexus between their ideals and their interests in the region, embedded in the 'no double standard' approach just described.

In relation to context, provided that nexuses between democracy, peace and development are far from automatic, democracy promotion should be regarded mostly as a structural, long-term conflict prevention policy in which successful conflict resolution, economic development and international organisations have to be pursued simultaneously to bring about democracy. These days, democracy cannot be conceived in isolation, but only as part of a more complex set of political, institutional and economic conditions.

Besides these broad conclusions, more specific policy recommendations for democracy promotion in the Arab countries can be drawn from the paper. In particular: a) democracy promotion policies must be redesigned to engage the liberalised autocratic Arab regimes that have circumvented previous attempts at democratisation; b) democracy promotion policies should be tailored more to the specific countries, in particular as regards sequencing (constitutional guarantees first) and the social segments that should be engaged as partners in democracy promotion (i.e. civil society and counter elites are not the same everywhere); c) the integration in the institutional political arena of Islamist political movements which abide by liberal constitutional rules can be approached with a twofold strategy of cultural dialogue with the advocates of Islamic reformation, and political support for Arab governments that allow for controlled integration of Islamists.

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[1] Requests of the Syrian General Congress, 2 July 1919 [Rossi 1944, p. 75].

[2] Art. 22 of the League of Nations Covenant regulating the mandates.

[3] K. Fleihan "US democracy program draws criticism", *Daily Star* (Beirut), Dec 12, 2002; "Slapping Egypt's wrist", *The Economist,* Aug 22, 2002.

[4] "Muslim opinion polls", *The Economist*, Oct 17, 2002; Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research *Index of Polls conducted between 1993-2000*, as posted on 15 May 2003 at

www.pcpsr.org/survey/index.html; Center for Strategic Studies *Poll # 23: Democracy in Jordan / 2000*, as on 15 May 2003 at www.css-jordan.org/polls/index.html.

[5] Our arguments in this section are based on Sartori's conceptualization as summarized in Sartori 1995.

[6] We are aware that this path is rejected by many in the West and in the Arab countries, especially in the light of the prevalence of Arab Jihadism in the second part of the 90's that led, inter alia, to 9/11. In short our argument is that, to the contrary, because *of Jihadism* Islamic liberalism must be supported wherever it exists.

[7] Islamic liberalism is presently reinforced by two trends: *religious secularization*, as in Turkey, with its long dated attempts to reconcile secularism and Islamic values in politics, and *religious reformation*, the transnational debate about the need to bridge Islam and Western values on the basis of an evolutionary interpretation of Islamic religious sciences [Sadri 200].

[8] Dahl's guarantees are: 1) freedom to form and join organizations; 2) freedom of expression; 3) right to vote; 4) right of political leaders to compete for (electoral) support; 5) alternative sources of information; 6) eligibility for public office; 7) free and fair elections; 8) institutions for making government policies dependent on votes or other expression of preference [Dahl 1971, p.3]. Note that Dahl's definition does not include democratic features that may be given for granted, such as universal suffrage.

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