

International Dimensions of Political Change in the MENA Region

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Abstract

This essay examines the international dimensions of political change in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, focusing specifically on the prospects for democratization. It sketches the major historical and cultural features constituting the MENA region, and situates it in the structure of world politics, and then examines the internal dynamics and international factors that help to explain why there has been less progress toward democracy in MENA than elsewhere. The conclusions reflect on the prospects for democratization, and on where the MENA region belongs in the context of the global spread of democracy.

Key words: Democratization, Middle East, North Africa, Islamism, international dimensions, domestic dynamics.

This essay examines the international dimensions of political change in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, focusing specifically on the prospects for democratization.

In this essay, the MENA region is conceived as stretching from Morocco in the west to Iran in the east, and from Turkey in the north to Yemen in the south. It thus embraces the Maghreb (Arab west), the Mashriq (Arab east), and the Arab Gulf. But it also includes non-Arab societies Turkey, Iran, and Israel. The northern limits are coterminous with the present European Union (Cyprus, Greece, and Malta are excluded). The southern limit is provided by the Sahara, which separates North Africa from the rest of the continent (I therefore exclude the Sudan, although it is a member of the Arab League and some consider it a MENA state).¹ To the east, neither Afghanistan nor Pakistan are included, nor

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¹ The Arab League does not include Iran, Israel, or Turkey but it does include Chad, the Comoros Djibouti, Eritrea, Mauritania, Somalia, Sudan, and Western Sahara. These twenty-five states have 360 million inhabitants.

are the central Asian, Caspian, and Caucasus republics. So although this MENA may be considered the core of the Islamic world (radiating out from Mecca), it is flanked to the northeast, east, and south by major Muslim-influenced or -dominated societies that are not included here.

Thus defined, the MENA region consists of nineteen sovereign states plus Palestine and the Western Sahara, and has a total population of about 450 million. Egypt, Turkey, and Iran are the three demographic heavyweights, each with over seventy million inhabitants; ten of the nineteen have less than ten million inhabitants each, although among the ten demographic lightweights there is Israel, which has a GDP roughly the same size as that of Egypt and Iran. The even less populous United Arab Emirates is not far behind in terms of wealth. Turkey is the richest of the big three, with a national income almost equal to that of Egypt and Iran combined. But the richest of all the states in the region is Saudi Arabia, which has no more than one-third of Turkey's population (the true figure is still uncertain) but a significantly higher level of total income and wealth.

The first section of this essay sketches the major historical and cultural features constituting the MENA "large region," and situates it in the structure of world politics. Although such sketching is inevitably approximate, it is important not to oversimplify, or to homogenize. There are inevitably major cross-currents and divisions within the MENA region, and it shares many features in common with other large regions and has others that distinguish it. Which characteristics are selected for investigation depends on which aspects of the international system and of political change one is trying to explain. Here, the relevant theoretical lens is the comparative study of contemporary processes of democratization, and the questions are what regional and international conditions facilitate such processes, and which may be the most crucial impediments.

In this region, what most attracts attention is the weakness or absence of democratization dynamics compared to elsewhere. Larry Diamond has recently formulated his position on this issue as follows: "The obstacle to democracy in the Middle East is not the culture or the religion of Islam, but rather the regimes themselves and the region's distinctive geopolitics."² So the first section of this essay surveys the distinctive features internal to this large region. The second part of the essay focuses on major international factors that help to explain why there has been less progress toward democracy in MENA than elsewhere. The conclusions reflect on the prospects for democratization, and thus on where the MENA region belongs in the context of the global spread of democracy.

² Larry Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy* (New York: Times Book, 2008), 277.

Part I: Internal Dimensions

A Disparate Region

Perhaps the most notable characteristic about the MENA region is its marked internal diversity. In terms of culture, it is certainly not linguistically, ethnically, or even religiously homogeneous. In addition to the striking outlier of the Jewish state of Israel, it includes Christian Copts in Egypt, Maronites in Lebanon, and Berbers in the Atlas Mountains and Kabylia, among many other distinct groups. Within the broad Islamic community, there is the well-known division between Shi'ites in Iran and Iraq among other states, and Sunnis in the Gulf and the Maghreb. There are also politically important heterodox sects, from the Druze in Lebanon and Israel, to Alawites in Syria, and Bahais in Israel and Iran.

The MENA region is also the site of many cross-national tensions and conflicts. No single state is in a position to exercise dominance over this region, which is instead criss-crossed by national rivalries and competitions for influence. At the national level, there are border tensions between Algeria and Morocco (over the Western Sahara); between Yemen and Saudi Arabia; between Iran and Iraq; and across the Strait of Hormuz. In addition, there are the more spectacular conflicts between Israel and Palestine, or concerning Kurdistan, and Syria-Lebanon. Just at present, Yemen also teeters on the edge of civil war between North and South (only unified in 1970). Efforts to combine Egypt with Syria failed in the early 1960s, and the Iraqi annexation of Kuwait in 1990 was promptly reversed. But these experiments remain within living memory. The unification of Saudi Arabia was achieved only as recently as 1932 and the sultanate of Oman achieved its current sovereign status and territorial unity only in the 1970s.

As a result of contested borders and conflicting territorial claims, the whole MENA region is heavily militarized, and various international wars have divided it: in 1967 and 1973 (when Israel vanquished her Arab neighbors); in 1980-1988 (when Iraq assaulted Iran and was eventually driven back); in 1982 and again in 2007 (when Israel invaded Lebanon); in 1990 (when Iraq invaded Kuwait, and was then driven out); in 2003 with the American-led invasion and occupation of Iraq; in addition to a large number of smaller frictions and armed conflicts. Israel's unconfessed regional nuclear-weapons monopoly is now coming under pressure from Iran (and perhaps also, if more secretly, from other states in the region). Saudi Arabia has long figured as the world's leading arms importer. It led in 1995-1997, with Egypt following well behind (ranking fourth), then Kuwait (fifth), Turkey (sixth), the United Arab Emirates (tenth), and Israel (thirteenth).³

³ U.S. Department of State Bureau of Verification and Compliance, *World Military Expectations and Arms Transfers 1988* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2000), 9.

The MENA region also has no dominant political system. The nineteen states include eight cases of hereditary rule; five one-party regimes (of which three might be classified as “quasi-hereditary” in that Assad, Gaddafi, and Mubarak are all privileged sons of long-standing party strongmen); four multiparty electoral regimes; one electoral façade theocracy (Iran); and one apparently “failing” state (Yemen). Both the Bertelsmann Transformation Index and the Freedom House ranking of civil political freedom worldwide place the great majority of these regimes variously at the bottom half of their global listings—with only two exceptions. Israel is classified as a high-quality democratic regime, and Turkey is also rated fairly favorably.

Moreover, MENA does not constitute an economic region either. Until recently, most of the MENA economies were inward-looking, apart from their energy exports. Since the 1990s, they have nearly all joined the WTO and liberalized their trade and investment regimes, but the main result of this has been to promote extra-regional economic exchanges. Initiatives such as the Pan Arab Free Trade Area (PAFTA) and the Great Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA) have not had much commercial impact. In any case, such regional groupings do not encompass a major part of MENA. In fact, they discriminate against major regional economies (Iran, Israel, and Turkey).

Given the far-flung contours of the MENA region and its multiple internal divisions, what unifying features can be discerned to justify treating it (at least for some analytical purposes) as a single “large region”? The answer requires at least some basic historical background, including consideration of the issue of “civilizations” (a term not necessarily reducible to “clashes”).

A Shared History

Despite its diversity, the MENA region rests on the bedrock of shared culture, and an Ottoman civilization that was subsequently fragmented and overwhelmed by European imperialism, Arab nationalism, and Westernization.

When Fernand Braudel surveyed the sixteenth-century civilization in the circum-Mediterranean region, he referred to it as “the Mediterranean World.” That inland sea provided the key lines of communication linking Southern Europe and Northern Africa, and Western Europe to the Eastern Mediterranean. This conception owed something to memories of the long-lost Roman Empire, which at its peak had spanned the great bulk of what are now the MENA region and the European Union (EU). After the fall of Rome, Christian Europe was divided into East and West, and both regions soon faced the transformative challenge of militant Islam. Roman unity gave way to a three-cornered contest for supremacy in the Mediterranean world, with Byzantium and successive Caliphates often more than a match for Western European Christendom. Braudel’s magisterial overview amply documents that these were complementary as well as competitive power structures.

The elimination of the Byzantine Empire with the fall of Constantinople

in 1453 meant that Ottoman Islam directly confronted the Renaissance Europe that Muslim scholarship had done so much to revive. At its zenith, in the late sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire created by Suleiman the Magnificent not only encompassed the whole of the modern MENA region (apart from a rump Morocco in the far west and a shrunken Persia in the far east), but also dominated the Black Sea and reached deep into Hungary (to Pest) and Central Europe. Not until the eighteenth century did the balance of advantage shift decisively back to Christian Europe. So the cleavage that now defines the status of the MENA region (peripheral and excluded, compared to an EU that sometimes sees itself as the heir to Western Christendom) is far from being an inevitable or timeless condition. From a historical perspective, this is essentially an artifact of the past two hundred years. Indeed, much of the detail that defines current regional politics is traceable to developments that occurred after the final dissolution of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924.

Napoleon's predatory expedition to Egypt in 1798 provides a convenient watershed event inaugurating the new geopolitical dispensation. By this time, the Ottoman Empire was already on the decline. The nineteenth-century industrial revolution was powered by steam and coal, which arrived late in the region. Only Turkey developed a significant coal industry, so steam power arrived from without in the rest of the region.

As the technology and enterprise gap widened, rival European powers began jostling with each other over the distribution of the territories shaken loose by the Ottoman contraction. For London, British supremacy in India dictated that France could not be allowed to pre-empt naval traffic through the Red Sea. By 1830, France had acquiesced to this logic, but in return required a free hand in Algeria. Then Tsarist Russia gained ascendancy in the Black Sea from its navy bases in the Crimea. Later, the British took Cyprus (Ottoman sovereignty there was only formal between 1878 and 1915) and thus secured naval dominance in the eastern Mediterranean. France completed the takeover of Tunisia. Then the Italians seized Libya. Just before the First World War, the French and Spanish divided control over Morocco—until they fell out and, under German pressure, agreed to a semi-sovereign monarchical solution.

Finally, the Ottomans threw in their lot with the Germans during the First World War (fearing the partition of the remains of their empire, and perhaps hoping to regain lost spoils in the Balkans). Thus, when the war was lost and the Kaiser fell, the Turkish Empire was doomed. Instead of restabilizing a multinational power centered on Istanbul, the disaggregation of the empire of Suleiman was completed by Kemal Ataturk, who shifted the capital to Ankara, and ended up creating an ethnic Turkish Republic based on the heartland of Anatolia. This included carrying out an "ethnic cleansing" of Greek coastal cities (a policy heartily reciprocated from Athens). The Ataturk regime then threw all its energies into the delayed "modernization" of the Turkish state and society, following the then dominant European notions about state building.

The MENA region that emerged from this highly compressed history is

composed of formally independent nation states, all members of the United Nations (the only exceptions are the occupied territories of Palestine, which are governed by Israel but not internationally recognized as its responsibility, and Western Sahara.) In addition, Iraq is in the process of emerging from occupation and reacquiring conventional sovereignty.

Many of these states acquired their present characteristics only fairly recently. The British and French expelled the Ottomans from their last Arab possessions at the end of the First World War, giving rise to protectorates that eventually produced the states of Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen were legally constituted sovereign states before the Second World War, but some time elapsed before these claims gained solidity.

The discovery of massive amounts of oil in the Middle East was crucial to the process of state formation and to political development: ten of the nineteen countries in the region can be classified as essentially “oil rentier states.” But this came too late for the Ottomans and disproportionately benefited Western oil companies, at least until the 1970s. The region’s present state system was not stabilized until after the Second World War, and indeed the decolonization of Algeria, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates took place only in the 1960s. Although the Algerian Revolution and the rise of Nasserism seemed at the time to herald an irresistible anti-imperialist surge, this faltered in the 1970s. Indeed, after 1979, the locus of opposition to Western dominance shifted to Iran, and most Arab regimes gave up illusions about the Soviet bloc, and sought an uneasy reconciliation with the United States and the European Union. In light of the United States-led occupation of Iraq in 2003, many in the region believe that decolonization from the West remains an unfinished task even today. But nowadays, they are more likely to turn to Islamism than to Arab socialism for their inspiration.

This panorama of regional restructuring over the past half century was further distorted, until 1990, by the polarizing impact of the Cold War. The whole region also remains deeply affected by the poisonous consequences of the creation in 1948 of the “Zionist” Jewish state, which remains at loggerheads with its neighbors, and has been unable to achieve a peace settlement with the uprooted Palestinian population. The question of Israel remains a crucial bone of contention, and a source of regional tension and insecurity. It troubles the entire MENA region: Jerusalem is also a holy site in Islam; the Jewish minorities that had been scattered across almost all these states have largely relocated there under the “law of return” (which favors foreign-born Jews over local-born Palestinians). Perhaps above all, the military power, economic prosperity, expansionist potential, and privileged Western connections of the seven-million-strong Israeli state dramatizes to the 440 million others in the region the failures and relative impotence of their governments.

This condensed summary suffices to demonstrate why, despite all its internal divisions and disparities, there is enough shared experience and outlook to give this “large region” a common and distinctive political profile.

Among these region-wide commonalities, the following stand out:

- The thousand year pre-eminence of a shared Islamic civilization;
- the sixteenth-century imperial magnificence of Ottoman rule over the region; the long disintegration in the face of European expansion throughout the nineteenth century;
- the traumatic shock of Ottoman collapse after defeat in the First World War;
- the belated arrival of imitative and competitive Western-style national states between the 1920s and the 1960s;
- the strategic rivalries and cupidity elicited by the discovery of vast hydrocarbon reserves across the region;
- the resulting rentier-state distortions and arms-trading, together with Cold War ideological intrusions; and,
- the unifying humiliations associated with the rise of Israel.

These historical features are essentially specific to the region. Taken together, they condition its political possibilities and priorities. It is hardly surprising if the rest of the world—less conscious of the combination of factors just outlined, or interested in only partial fragments of this holistic configuration—find some of the region’s present-day political reflexes obtuse, or perhaps even unintelligible. Even from within the region, it can be difficult to locate coherent and self-aware expressions of these over-arching realities, since each national authority articulates the shared regional narrative according to its own very partial perspective, and in the light of the shifting interests of the moment.

The MENA Region since the 1970s

Before the Iranian Revolution, secular Arab nationalism was the dominant manifestation of anti-imperialist or anti-Western reflexes. This was particularly associated with Nasserism, orchestrated from Cairo. But it was also entrenched in Aden, Algeria, Iraq, in the two ruling wings of the “Ba’ath” Socialist party in Syria, and in the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). In addition, it had a serious following in Lebanon and Yemen, and it was seen as a threat to the Western-aligned monarchies of Morocco and the Persian Gulf (except perhaps Saudi Arabia, where the traditional monarchy seemed almost immune). Gaddafi’s Libya followed a maverick, but parallel track. Only Tunisia and Turkey had secular republican regimes that were clearly pro-Western.

Support and encouragement from the Soviet bloc—including arms supplies and technical assistance—helped to bolster the assertiveness and the modernizing secularism of these Arab socialist currents. It favored state-led development strategies, and impeded private foreign investment. But thereafter, Nasserism, and then Arab secularism, went into steep decline. The Egyptian variant never recovered from two shattering defeats at the hands of

Israel, in 1967 and 1973. The broader secular state development model went into a downward spiral once oil prices fell. And it turned out that bureaucratic socialism was little better at wealth-creation beyond hydrocarbons than Soviet central planning, particularly once Moscow's assistance dried up.

Nationalism became unconvincing as entrenched state elites failed to deliver on their earlier promises and responded to popular disillusion by suppressing free expression. Students, educated sectors, army officers, and state employees, who had provided the strongest constituencies for Arab socialism, often experienced the brunt of this repression, while societal religiosity was left relatively untouched. To the surprise of many of its foreign sympathizers, modernizing Arab secularism proved fragile and evanescent in the face of deeply entrenched traditional attitudes and practices underpinned by the mosque, the family, and the clan, which were increasingly financed and orchestrated from outside national boundaries.

The most striking feature of this generational and attitudinal shift is that it has taken place across such widely divergent contexts within the MENA region. For example, there was not just a rise in support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan, but also for the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS) in post-revolutionary Algeria, and for Islamic parties in highly secular Turkey. This "reinvention of tradition" was not just political, and was not necessarily backward-looking. It captured the allegiance of the educated young, of women as well as men, and of those most exposed to global culture (via travel, the Internet, and so on). Although some in the West have viewed it as inherently reactionary and anti-modern, it carries significant democratic potential—much like Christian democracy and liberation theology within the Catholic Church of the 1960s and 1970s.

In this context, the Muslim Brotherhood grew in stature and reached various Sunni sectors of the Arab world, while the Saudi monarchy used its custodianship of the Holy Cities and its vast oil reserves to promote a puritan Wahhabi sectarianism wherever it could. After 1979, the region's Shi'ia faithful were mobilized and politicized by the Ayatollahs ensconced in power in Tehran. Only in Tunisia, Turkey, and Kurdistan did secular Westernizing nationalism retain its former strongholds. The Arab world, in particular, was shaken from below by a resurgence of these divergent strands of political Islam. This trend was also encouraged by Western powers seeking to expel the Soviet army and its secular allies following Moscow's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

Political Islam grew in popularity and strength in many parts of the Arab world and in Iran in part because—unlike Arab nationalism—it emerged neither defeated nor humiliated from the various military tests to which it was subjected. Whereas the British and the Americans had succeeded in overthrowing the secular nationalist government of Premier Mossadegh when he threatened to nationalize their oil companies in the 1950s, President Carter's hostage rescue mission ended with some kind of victory for the clergy who led the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Teheran's ensuing war with secular nationalist

Ba'athist Iraq was a trial by fire, but after tremendous sacrifice and suffering, the godless Iraqi invaders were eventually driven back. Afghan secularists allied to Moscow were also defeated and destroyed by the community of the faithful (with much Western assistance).

After 1990, Saddam Hussein's heavily equipped Soviet-style land forces proved no match for the allied forces that first drove him out of Kuwait, then took control of his airspace, and eventually invoked the pretext of weapons of mass destruction to complete the demolition of his still basically secular Ba'athist dictatorship. When the ultra-modern forces of Israel encroached into Lebanon (both in 1982 and again in 2007), it was only the secularists who lost ground. With support from Iran, Hezbollah sprang up in their place, and was seen by Arab opinion as fighting Israel to a standstill in the second round. Similarly in Yemen, the Aden-based secularists were outmaneuvered and eventually overwhelmed by the generally more traditional and religious northern Yemenis. Only in Algeria (where the *Front de Libération Nationale*, or FLN, enjoyed exceptional legitimacy as a consequence of its expulsion of the French between 1954 and 1962) was it possible for a secular party to crush a major Islamic insurgency—but at a huge cost both in bloodshed and in legitimacy.

Admittedly, the House of Saud and the Egyptians have also confronted challenges from jihadist insurgencies (including the 1979 occupation of the Great Mosque in Mecca and the assassination of President Sadat in 1981). But these were crushed before they could gain momentum (and in any case, the Saudis had never been touched by secular nationalism, which was also absent from much of the Arab Gulf). In general, believers were seen to display a will to fight, and a capacity to resist, that seemed beyond the power of most secularists. The Nasserists and Arab nationalists had demanded sacrifices on behalf of state projects that always inspired limited societal allegiance, and that lost momentum over time. By contrast, the cause of Allah could be presented as timeless, universal, and worthy of unlimited dedication. Since secular nationalists had proved incapable of rebuffing the humiliations inflicted on the *Umma* by Western imperialist powers in alliance with Israel, perhaps the Islamists might do better.

In reality, of course, fealty to Islam acquired different political expressions in different parts of the MENA region, and political Islam (some call it “Islamism” or even “Islamic fundamentalism”) has never appealed equally to all sectors of these heterogeneous societies. Instead, competing variants of Islamic allegiance (some quiescent, some reformist, and some radical) have vied for the allegiance of the faithful, with ruling families often well-placed to capture much of the available clientele.

As for republican regimes, it should be remembered that the early secularists had been highly authoritarian and elitist. They viewed the superstitions of their peoples with scant respect, and aimed to force state building from above, and against the grain of much popular sentiment. But such attitudes belonged to

the first generation of state builders, when the new structures were little more than ideas on paper. By the time second- and third-generation leaders came to power, these supposedly visionary elites were replaced by institutions and interests that required stable support from an increasingly settled, plural, and even middle-class urban society. When the secularists belatedly reached out to the social forces they had nurtured, they often found these to be surprisingly traditional in outlook and social practices.

Surprise about this is not confined to an outgoing generation of Arab nationalists. In general, the “post-socialist” societies continue to manifest various forms of popular religiosity and demotic beliefs and reflexes that were supposed to have been relegated to the “dustbin of history” by modernizing state elite. But democrats should be wary of such judgments. On the one hand, that secularist ruling stratum was seldom as modern and progressive as it tried to pretend. And on the other side, the social forces that seek to emerge from their tutelage are usually better characterized as pluralist and post-secular than as uniformly backward-looking.

The recent revival of religious themes in political discourse is evidently by no means confined to the Arab world. In Turkey, for example, the strongly secularist structure of the constitutional order has come under increasing pressure as a freer and more sophisticated electorate has exercised its preferences through the ballot box (no jihadi tendencies would be tolerated there). Outside the Islamic world, and notably in North America, secularism has also lost its presumption of political ascendancy, with knock-on effects elsewhere. The consequences are diverse, and challenging for liberal democracy—but not necessarily anti-democratic, either within the MENA region or more globally.

The “reinvention of tradition” extends far beyond radical Islamism or the rise of ultra-orthodox tendencies within Israel, and can include liberalizing currents—for example within the Muslim Brotherhood—and even quite tolerant and progressive variants of traditional beliefs (such as the rise of Christian Democracy within the Catholic Church). Although some of the symbolism involved may appear to outsiders as threatening and even atavistic, on closer inspection, it is often possible to detect a healthy renewal of debate and legitimate challenges to failed autocratic structures. Democratic change is more likely to take root if it grows from within the traditions of a society than if it is transplanted from without.⁴

⁴ Esposito provides a vivid account of the great diversity of beliefs and views in contention in contemporary Islam, and highlights the scope for reformist variants to flourish if suitably supported. John L. Esposito, *The Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). See also, Ahmet T. Kuru, “A Research Note on Islam, Democracy, and Secularism,” *Insight Turkey* 11, no. 4 (2009): 29-40.

Part II: External Dimensions

The MENA Region and Its Near Neighborhood

One crucial international reality defining the MENA region's place in the world has long been its troubled relationship to its alter ego and nemesis: the dominant "large region" of Europe. The historical conflict with Christendom became a mixture of imitation and resistance of a postwar apparently secularized Europe.

After 1945, the rival European empires were dismantled and the UN system was embraced as a universal liberal internationalist framework. This UN and EU universalism claimed to offer emergent states all over the world a new disposition, with formal equality of treatment, respect for international boundaries, and the nonviolent settlement of disputes, among other benefits. In practice, however, these attractive principles arrived belatedly and unevenly to the MENA region.

The Suez operation and the Algerian War might be viewed as last gasps of the pre-UN era, but the Security Council has never held Israel to the terms of the UN General Assembly resolutions adopted after 1967 and 1973, and asymmetric relations between this region and Europe still rankle in many of its quarters. Still, the Europe that has taken shape since 1979 is very different from before, and much closer to the peaceful and rule-governed community of states envisioned by the UN model than the emerging state system of the MENA region.

Thus, if one axis of political change since 1979 was the radicalization that followed from the Iranian Revolution and the surge in political Islam, a second no less crucial dynamic has been the crystallization of the European Union, as both a pole of attraction and, at the same time, a source of invidious comparison.

One view holds that the EU incarnates the universal values of modern civilization, and aims to help the MENA countries to achieve and share those same values. But a second view is that the EU is still "Christendom," a secular reincarnation of the Holy Roman Empire. In the latter guise, it revives the old "clash of civilizations," presenting the Islamic world with a superficially more benign, but still essentially dissolvent, version of the old crusader identity. It may no longer pursue its aims through military means (although Middle Eastern dependence on European arms suppliers qualifies that reassurance), but it still seeks hegemony through commerce and cultural supremacy. It also attracts many deracinated Muslim migrants, whose human capital is thereby lost to their countries of origin.

This negative view of Europe is highly schematic, and overlooks the countervailing links of mutual interest and interdependence. It has become apparent over the past decade that the Europeans can sometimes be as troubled as their southern neighbors by this picture of inherent civilizational conflict.

The key points to emphasize here are that the EU genuinely believes itself to be acting as a long-term benefactor and stabilizer of its troubled MENA partners (as with the Barcelona Process), but that the treaty and the internal politics of the Union provided for southward (as far as Spain, Portugal, and Greece) and eastward (as far as the Baltic and the Balkans) expansion, although not across the Mediterranean (Morocco was ruled permanently ineligible for membership), and only very uncertainly as far as Turkey (technically eligible for membership but kept in the anteroom ever since the early 1960s, and still in limbo). Cyprus was admitted without waiting for the reunification of its Greek and Turkish segments.

Surveys of European public opinion seem to indicate that the ancient civilizational reflexes, no doubt reinforced by some Islamophobia and calculations of national interest, remain sufficient to block Turkey's accession more or less indefinitely, however successfully the Turkish republic embraces "universalist" EU rules and discourse. Thus, in the spring of 2008, 85 percent of Austrian voters, 78 percent of Greeks, 77 percent of Germans, and 71 percent of French voters were opposed to EU membership for Turkey "in principle." When asked by Eurobarometer whether they would accept Turkey once it had complied with the conditions set by the EU, 79 percent of Austrians, 63 percent of Germans, and 60 percent of French voters still said no. These points should be put into their correct long-term demographic perspective. The population of the EU twenty-seven is presently about 10 percent larger than that of the MENA nineteen. But that includes a growing sector of alienated Maghrebi and Turkish migrant workers in France, Germany, and Spain; and anyway, with the European Union's population set to age, stagnate, and then probably shrink, the demographic balance is guaranteed to swing from North to South over the next couple of generations. Indeed, one of the unspoken sources of EU fear of Turkey is the realization that after accession it would be on track to displace Germany as the most populous member of the Union (entitled, under EU rules, to correspondingly heavy representation in the EU Parliament and other bodies). So what may look like a stable, virtuous, and beneficent EU when viewed from Brussels or Berlin is liable to assume a somewhat more equivocal profile when considered from the standpoint of the excluded and marginalized, but burgeoning, populations of the MENA region.

To summarize, the international factors affecting the MENA region since the 1970s have included a decline of secular Arab nationalism (apparently a consequence of the collapse of the Soviet counterweight to Western dominance); the strategic and developmental impact of oil dependence; the global but regionally concentrated rise of political Islam; and some long-term tensions between the two halves of the Mediterranean world that contemporary demographic and geopolitical realities may reawaken. I now turn to the role of the United States.

The MENA Region and the United States

London was the dominant Western power in the Mashriq (Arabia, from Egypt eastward, including the Gulf) while Britain ruled India and exercised naval supremacy in the eastern Mediterranean. And as long as France ruled Algeria, Paris was the dominant Western power in the Maghreb of North Africa. The Suez crisis of 1956 foreshadowed the displacement of these old imperial powers by a new Western hegemon.

Washington's engagement in the region came first through the oil majors and then through the Fifth and Sixth Fleets (covering the Gulf and the Mediterranean, respectively). The initial cornerstone of this post-1945 United States commitment aimed to block Soviet expansion beyond the Black Sea. Greece and Turkey joined the founding members of NATO in 1952. No other MENA state has been admitted since, but in 1955 the United States (joined by the United Kingdom) created the Middle East Treaty Organization (a product of the "Baghdad Pact," and later known as CENTO) to enlist Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and Turkey in an extension of its security cordon around the southern flank of the USSR. Iraq defected after the 1958 revolution, and Iran broke its alliance with the United States in 1979, at which point the remnant of CENTO was dissolved.

In practice, therefore, Washington's only consistent military ally in the Islamic part of the MENA region has been Turkey. These bilateral ties remain durable and substantial. They outclass continuing British security ties with various former colonies, and France's links with Morocco or Tunisia. Whereas the EU has delayed economic and political integration with Turkey for almost half a century now, the United States has embraced military cooperation and security partnership equally consistently, and for even longer. Whereas Greece and Cyprus have both contended with strong electoral currents hostile to military alignment with Washington, and both have now joined the EU, Turkey has never experienced democratic opposition to its privileged alignment with the United States (although the PKK was a violent opponent), and at least until very recently, the Turkish military establishment retained tacit reserve powers that effectively served to block any such questioning.

Notwithstanding this, American support for military power seizures in 1960 and 1980 do rankle with some Turks, and the elected authorities in Ankara were at best tepid allies during the 2003 American-British occupation of Iraq and its aftermath. Turkish security interests include continuing rivalry with Greece over Cyprus and chronic anxiety over the legacy of past state-building policies of "Turkification" in Armenia and Kurdistan. Like Brussels, Washington has been swayed by the lobbying of Armenian Christians who recall the genocide of 1915. And although this may not be remembered by many American policymakers, Turkish nationalists have not forgotten that Woodrow Wilson's doctrine of self-determination after the First World War included a separate state for the Kurdish people.

Beyond oil and Soviet containment, the third fundamental axis of United States policy in the MENA region has long been its unwavering commitment to the security of the state of Israel. Although some hoped—and others feared—that the accession of President Obama to the White House in 2009 might at least slightly diminish that bond and thus free up Washington more genuinely to play the role of “honest broker” on the Palestine issue, the indications to date are that no such repositioning will be forthcoming.⁵ All three priorities have the effect of accentuating national rivalries and centrifugal tendencies within the MENA region.

Whereas it could be argued that the underlying thrust of EU policy is to establish regional partnerships and multilateral cooperation, the logic of American commitments has always been to sharpen the contrast between Washington’s most favored protégés (initially Turkey, then Israel, perhaps also Morocco) and their neighbors. The activities of the oil majors and the arms traders tend in the same centrifugal direction. In this respect (as in various others), British policy is often closer to that of Washington’s than that of Brussels.

In this context, it may be worth making a brief comparison with the Barcelona Process and the subsequent neighborhood partnership proposals that emerged from the EU after the mid-1990s. These are worthy of comment for the contrasting principles on which they are based, rather than because of their success or their impact.

Initiatives of the United States and the European Union in the MENA Region

The EU is a legal economic and political entity (a “civil power”) rather than a military hegemon; and its external relations are run by a multinational bureaucracy rather than by a traditional foreign policy establishment. The Barcelona Process and the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) operate on the basis of mutually respectful dialogue among sovereign states, and the associated economic and political cooperation is predicated on the discovery of common values rather than on the discipline of power politics.

The basic claim of that process is that it is in the long-run interests of societies and civilizations, which are condemned by geopolitical propinquity to live together, to build legal conflict-resolving and trust-enhancing partnerships. The EU philosophy stresses regional integration (a logical extension of the Union’s internal structures) rather than bilateral ties. In principle, therefore,

⁵ By 2010, the United States had exercised its veto in the UN Security Council twenty-nine times to shield Israel’s behavior in the occupied Palestinian territories and eleven times to protect its actions in Lebanon. It seems set to take the same position on the Goldstone Report concerning Israel’s actions in Gaza in 2008.

the MENA region has access to two distinct, if overlapping, sources of external Western influence. For some purposes, the muscular and divisive realism of the United States may be appropriate. But it could be argued that MENA already has enough of that. If so, the more consensual and collaborative philosophy that has served to unify a hitherto bitterly divided Europe could, in principle, also provide some valuable guidelines for the conflictive region to the south of the EU. This would also highlight the features of the Mediterranean world evoked by Braudel, and might counter the otherwise destructive tendency toward a “clash of civilizations.”

All this may look good on paper, but it hardly chimes with recent history. For one thing, the benign view of the EU just outlined conveniently glosses over its fundamental decision to engage in expansion eastward—incorporating the western half of the former Soviet bloc—and to refuse all enlargement southward. It also overlooks the slightly longer-term history of European colonial expansion in the MENA region, and the fact that the problem of Israel was largely created by European pogroms—and the Holocaust. Even on a shorter time horizon, what most MENA observers recall are EU blunders in the Balkans, and hypocrisy over Cyprus, rather than the more sanitized version of history circulated from the Berlaymont.

Even the contrast with Washington can be questioned. It was, after all, the Clinton Administration that took the lead in promoting the Oslo Peace Process, and that finally rose to the Balkan challenge when the EU had failed to exercise restraint there. And although the atrocity of September 11, 2001, radicalized American nationalism against much Islamic opinion, European Islamophobia may seem equally troubling.

Washington’s privileged partnership with Israel may well seem one-sided to many outside observers. But it has an important rationale, and it has not necessarily prevented the United States from sometimes exercising a positive influence over a deep conflict that was, after all, created by others. The idea that Israel was always bound to be the privileged agent of Washington in the MENA region strikes me as a narrative constructed from the present backward. However that may be, by the 1970s, the ties of mutual commitment had become very strong.

The Zionist lobby in the United States has some part to play here, but there are other major contributing strategic and ideological convergences. Indeed, the OPEC price rises of the 1970s were directed against the major oil-consuming nations, with the United States at the forefront. And at a time when Moscow had established tutelary relations with various Arab states, Israel remained a reliable pro-Western bulwark. Western opinion, heavily influenced by the emotions stirred by the Holocaust, diverges from MENA sensitivities that are more swayed by the plight of the displaced Palestinians. If one overlooks its treatment of them, Israel can be convincingly portrayed as a freer and more open society than any of its neighbors. Its strong links to the West are, of course, cultural, commercial, and familial, as well as political, military, and

biblical.

Israel also has a highly focused agenda of its own, and Washington policymakers, with their much broader mandates, have not always succeeded in differentiating their objectives from those pursued in Jerusalem. The 1982 invasion of Lebanon was a case in point, and premiers Sharon and Netanyahu both have considerable track records of attempting to corral their American protector into commitments that may run counter to broader interests of the United States in the MENA region as a whole.

It is against this background that the Oslo Peace Process of 1993 and its sequels are best assessed. As with the previous Camp David accord promoted by the Carter Administration, the overall framework designed to eliminate the main sources of conflict between Israel and its neighbors through a “two state” solution, should in principle command wide support, both international and internal. The only long-run alternative is for the democratic state of Israel to disintegrate or be destroyed, an outcome that would seem both hypothetical and—if it were to occur—a further catastrophe for the Palestinian people, as well as for the citizens of Israel.

The basically constructive and necessary thrust of these American-led “peace” initiatives merits general endorsement, but bitter experience teaches that the details of process and implementation outweigh such abstract considerations. Beyond the intricacies—they would require a different essay—the fundamental problems here are that Israel has grown stronger under Washington’s protection, has shifted the correlation of regional forces in its favor, and has humiliated and destabilized its neighbors. This has been reinforced by the demographic influx of an additional cohort of extra-regional Jewish migrants following the collapse of the Soviet bloc, and by the disarray of the pro-Palestinian forces in the region (Saddam Hussein’s belligerence proved a false comfort to the rejectionists).

Hence, a stronger and more expansionist Israel remains existentially insecure and fearful of any peace that weakens its defense or curbs its autonomy of action. So Washington needs a different Israeli partner from the one that actually exists, if it is to stabilize the broader energy, security, and alliance interests of the United States in the MENA region. There is currently little sign that this underlying tension between the two parties is likely to be resolved any time soon. The rhetoric of the peace process barely conceals the reality of this geopolitical deadlock. Only some kind of broadening of democracy across what was once a single Palestine Mandate could eventually draw the poison from this deeply destructive impasse.

Finally, of course, September 11, 2001, refocused the attention of Americans on the MENA region, but under conditions that have not favored judicious policymaking or a fair hearing for all the contending points of view. An initial reaction in the United States to the Twin Towers atrocity was to aim for the “liberation” of Iraq, seen as a precursor to the transformation of the Greater Middle East into another pro-Western and prodemocratic “large

region,” like the former USSR and Latin America. If Nazi Germany, imperial Japan, fascist Italy, and Soviet Russia could all be transformed by the magic of Western rewards and punishments, why not the Islamic world? That gloriously ideological vision predictably foundered in the aftermath of the Iraq occupation (although current developments in Iran could still give it a brief second half-life).

Six years later, the arrival of the Obama Administration in Washington may signal a clear break with such transformational ambitions, and a new focus on coming to terms with the messy realities of MENA in the wake of Washington’s Iraqi adventure. But lurking in the background remains the phantom of another massive terrorist attack on the heartland of the United States (or perhaps more realistically in Europe) that might be traced back to the Arab Middle East. In any case, the baggage left behind by recent actions and engagements of the United States will have to be managed on its own terms.

Thus, Washington’s margin to maneuver has been greatly narrowed, as the dominant Western power finds itself needing to stabilize a regional order previously disrupted by its own initiatives. The British were in a similar position in the 1950s. Some kind of pull-back—trying to leave in place local structures favorable to basic Western interests—seems the main strategic alternative to the neo-con vision. But if Washington cannot complete its project of democratizing and transforming the region, the United States may also be unable to disengage from such a crucial reserve of hydrocarbons, such a potential source of violent hostility, and such a crucible of religious and “civilizational” inspiration.

The balance of the West’s interests and objectives in this large region are still hard to decipher. The current U.S. administration is confronted by the legacy left by its predecessor. On November 6, 2003, President George W. Bush told the National Endowment for Democracy that “sixty years of Western nations’ excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe—because in the long run stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty. As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export.”⁶ But barely two years later, in January 2006, when the first relatively free elections were held in Gaza following the Israeli withdrawal, Hamas won 56 percent of the seats. From then on, the support of the United States for competitive elections in the region waned, and when Egypt and Jordan changed the rules to block the Muslim Brotherhood from participating in electoral competition, Washington reverted to longstanding practice and lent its tacit support.

Throughout the Arab part of the Middle East, the current position of the Western democracies seems far removed from earlier rhetoric. Neither the

⁶ Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy*, 263.

United States nor the European Union is prepared to run any risk of political instability among friendly regimes merely in order to promote the West's so-called "freedom agenda." The only competitive electoral process to elicit any serious Western interest is that of Iraq (still under heavy military occupation). There, the dominant Western objective has been to legitimize a post-invasion regime that, whatever its other failings, will facilitate the orderly withdrawal of allied troops, and the long-associated return of the international oil companies. Beyond that, any democratization that may occur in the Arab world will have to be the product of internal pressures, and will be viewed with ambivalence and unease by the Western democracies—especially if Israel's security could be diminished.

President Obama's eloquent speech in Cairo in June 2009 briefly raised hopes of a new dawn in U.S.-Arab relations. Since then, and beyond the Arab world, Secretary of State Clinton has reacted to the post-election turmoil in Iran by describing that country as heading toward a "military dictatorship." Even so, it is far from clear that principled opposition to authoritarian rule can be the touchstone of Washington's policies in the MENA region. If, indeed, the Obama Administration does dislike military rule in the region, it could be well-placed to demonstrate its preferences in the current civil-military standoff in Turkey.

The West remains heavily dependent on the Middle East for its energy security, and both the United States and Europe serve as large-scale suppliers of the weapons and equipment that the MENA region's governments require for their defense—and also for their internal security. Such "hard power" considerations have long taken precedence over the "soft power" alternative formula for winning support and stabilizing the West's regional influence.

In fact, the Western democracies may have less capacity to project their "soft power" in the MENA region than in almost any other large world region. The absence of local democratic counterparts who would be acceptable to Western opinion; the attachment to the unpopular cause of Israel; and the inability to find common ground with the region's civilization and religious traditions all undercut the "soft power" approach. Washington discourse currently favors neither "hard" nor "soft" power, but rather a blend of the two, referred to as "smart power." After intervening in Iraq so recently and so painfully, the hard power option has understandably fallen out of favor. However, a wholehearted switch of policy instruments would be extremely risky and destabilizing. And in the MENA region at least, it seems that the "smart power" compromise formula is something of an illusion. If the West's aim is to be both strong and credible, its current lack of consistency over democratic issues is liable to render it both untrustworthy and no longer in control.

Conclusion: Prospects for Democratization

At present, the MENA region stands in clear contrast to all other large world

regions, because it is so unequivocally undemocratic. Elsewhere, the picture may be uneven, with India a democracy, but not Pakistan; or Japan, but not China; or South Africa, but not the Congo. Even where democratic transitions have been the norm, the “quality” of the resulting democratic regimes may be variable to poor (as in Russia, parts of the Andes, Central America, and so on). But in the MENA region, setting aside the extremely anomalous and problematic case of Israel, there is only one reasonably plausible democracy (Turkey—still rated “part free” by Freedom House), and despite the elections in Iraq, most neutral analysts see limited prospects for further real democratic advances in the region any time soon.

Certainly, Freedom House ratings for political and civil freedoms do not paint a positive picture of the MENA region. Only Israel is classified as “free” and eleven of the nineteen states under review are “not free.”⁷ Of the intermediary group, Yemen borders on state failure; Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, and Morocco are still subject to dynastic rule; and only Turkey displays real momentum toward full democratization.

The UNDP surveys of human development point in a similarly discouraging direction, particularly in regard to education and gender rights. This region is not poor, it does not lack historical cultural and scientific achievements, nor is it isolated from the “demonstration effects” of exposure to the best that the Western democratic tradition can offer. But it has certainly not embraced the “end of history” fate that Francis Fukuyama boldly assigned to the whole world after 1990; even twenty years later, the prevailing direction of change does not seem toward conventional liberal democracy.

Admittedly, Freedom House ratings are only partial and perhaps distorted indicators. The retreat of the secular nationalists means that where popular sentiment is allowed to influence political arrangements, many inhabitants of the MENA region may be more willing to turn to the Qur’an for guidance on political and civil rights than to their unresponsive ruling regimes. Islam is a civilization with strong juridical traditions. It has an elaborated doctrine on rights and obligations, with multiple internal debates on precisely where the boundaries lie and who is entitled to adjudicate. From within this tradition, it has long been possible to formulate tolerant and pluralist conceptions of political order and of legitimate government, just as Christianity and Judaism have also permitted. But family law, dress codes, attitudes toward the consumption of alcohol, and the like, will vary from one context to the other, and some features of the current liberal democratic Western canon may remain

⁷ The main Freedom House classification refers only to “Israel itself” and not to Israeli-occupied territories or Palestinian-administered areas. The latter contain about 35 percent of the total population involved in the unresolved conflict there, and are rated “not free.” If freedom and democracy in the entire territory subject to effective Israeli control were assessed as a single unit, there would be no “free” states in the MENA region.

unacceptable to most MENA citizens (as they also do in parts of Utah and among the ultra-orthodox Jews of Jerusalem). To judge the MENA region as falling short by international standards of democratic performance in these areas is to overestimate the universalism of Western standards, and to focus criticism on those areas least likely to respond to external pressures.

A better alternative could be to take seriously the debates about democracy and democratization that are ongoing within the MENA civilizational tradition, and to focus attention on the source of political moderation and inclusion emerging from within the grain of local practices. Turkey provides the most encouraging current illustration of how this might work; although much remains unsettled even there, and the simple dichotomies often used by Westerns to categorize the Turkish alternatives require substantial qualification.⁸ Iran, the other major non-Arab state, also struggles to reconcile its religious and civilizational traditions with popular aspirations for freedom and accountability, albeit with far more difficulties at present.

As for the Arab regimes, Larbi Sadiki provides an illuminating exegesis of the debates about democracy that have been ongoing in the Arab-language academic and policy literature over the past century. These debates are not couched in quite the same terms as the English-language literature that dominates democratization studies. But they are not that distant. There is a shift of idiom required, but once that is undertaken, a more genuinely internationalist and cross-civilizational dialogue on the possibilities for democracy becomes possible.⁹

Moving beyond discourse, Sadiki also examines the specific social actors and organizational practices that display the best potential to strengthen broadly democratic political attitudes and behavior from the bottom up. Electoral processes may have proved fundamental in other large regions, and if all goes well, they will in due course become central to more extensive democratization in this large region also. But for the time being, elections, as currently managed, are not generally the most constructive channels for advancing the cause of democracy, and Sadiki performs a service by directing our attention to other possibilities—including the satellite media.¹⁰

Under what conditions might the Islamist political movements of the

⁸ Nora Fisher's division of the main political position in contemporary Turkey into four rather than two, does much to improve on the standard dichotomous framework. See Nora Fisher Onar, "Beyond Binaries, 'Europe', Pluralism, and a Revisionist Status Quo Key to Turkish Politics," Winner of a Sakip Sabanci Research Award, http://www.sabanciuniv.edu/tr/arastirma/sakip_sabanci_uluslararasi_arastirma_odulu/images/Nora_Fisher_Onar_Sabanci_Essay_Contest_2009_Final.pdf (accessed May 18, 2010).

⁹ Larbi Sadiki, *The Search for Arab Democracy: Discourses and Counter-Discourses* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

¹⁰ Larbi Sakiki, *Rethinking Arab Democratization: Elections without Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Arab world move in a more democratic direction? Repression by authoritarian regimes can exercise an educative effect upon such movements, but it could work either way. One option would be to embrace radical resistance (perhaps by escalating hostility toward Israel and seeking support from Iran). The other alternative would be to deepen Islamic commitments to tolerance and human rights, and to seek broader democratic alliances against local autocracies (perhaps following the example of the Turkish AKP). So long as neither option yields much success, the balance between the two remains unresolved. The absence of progress on the Israel-Palestine front tends to perpetuate this impasse.

Western support for persecuted socialist and even communist activists in Latin America had the effect of winning many of them around to constitutionalism and democratic political processes, for example. Similarly, the Vatican and the Christian Democratic International exerted a restraining and democratizing influence over conservative Catholic circles that had hitherto opted for Franco-style intolerance. The same kind of logic could also operate in the MENA region. So far, there has been little attempted in this vein, in part because democrats are often reluctant to extend their conception of democracy far enough to make common ground with reformist currents within political Islam.¹¹

Since the gamut of democratic opinion in the United States and Europe does not so easily correspond to the MENA political spectrum, so the channels of international communication at party level are absent. (No German party foundation would be likely to offer funding to a Muslim Brotherhood electoral campaign, no matter how moderate; nor would such support be acceptable to the recipients).¹² This “discourse” of civilization curbs the impact of external democracy support in the MENA region, even when it does not amount to an outright “clash.”

Although the MENA region presents a range of distinctive barriers to political democratization, the prospects can still be evaluated with reference to the same international factors that operate elsewhere. Thus, for example, according to democratic peace theory, democracies are far less likely to wage war against each other. But however that may be, in this region, and in the absence of democracy there, the zero-sum logic of international confrontation can prove much harder to contain. Thus also, if regional “clustering” (or “snowballing”) is a significant component of democratization dynamics, in

¹¹ As Diamond puts it, “There is no way that democratization can proceed in any Arab country today without finding some measure of accommodation with at least some substantial segment of political Islam.” See Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy*, 285.

¹² A recent Oxford doctorate by Farid Senzai shows that, in Egypt, Western NGOs are lavish in funding civil society movements that compete with the local Islamists, but lack their local roots.

general, MENA experience seems to indicate the reciprocal possibility of anti-democratic clustering. Similarly, if undirected nongovernmental channels of transmission (“contagion”) can supplement, or even supersede, state-led democracy promotion efforts, the absence of blockage of such channels in the MENA region can negate international prodemocracy policies there. Above all, if concerted great power policies of conditionality and control can sometimes “export” or “impose” the local observance of democratic formalities in some large regions of the world, it is equally likely that when the same powers prioritize risk control and the suppression of instability, as in the MENA region, they may manage to frustrate, or at least postpone, the emergence of democratizing tendencies that could potentially undermine their security and/or economic interests.

Even so, it is also worth highlighting the continuing importance of extra-national lines of influence and communication *within* the MENA region. Linguistic and cultural commonalities and a shared historical tradition are important here. As yet, within the region, the only compelling source of reassurance that democratization can be a locally grown accomplishment is in Turkey (Israel’s achievements are received as an affront, rather than an encouragement). Perhaps Turkish democracy could grow in strength and attraction until it constituted a pole of attraction radiating throughout the region. In the Arab world, Larry Diamond singles out Morocco as the most promising site for democratic progress, and speculates on the demonstration effects that could follow from a—at present elusive—breakthrough there.¹³

The EU would certainly be well advised, in its own long-run interest, to encourage such tendencies. But there are limits to the demonstration effects likely to flow from the Turkish heartland to the rest of the Arab world. There, the initial authoritarian phase of state building has been superseded, but the resulting political regimes are all troubled by legitimacy deficits. They do not trust their subjects to exercise their political freedoms, and they lack confidence in their standing in the international arena. So they obstruct internal debate, they fear criticism, and they compete with their neighbors for external patronage (and weaponry). Experiments in political liberalization are hesitant and quickly reversed—this despite the fact that, on the face of it, democratization might offer a stable solution to these sources of regime weakness.

A successful transition to democracy in any one of these Arab states could have a galvanizing effect across the region. That is why the idea of democratic regime change in Iraq had some superficial plausibility. In practice, however, the coercive execution of this idea has inflicted a major set-back to the cause of democratization in the MENA region. If, say, Tunisia or Jordan or Morocco could be shown to benefit from the embrace of standard multiparty alternation

¹³ Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy*, 281-283.

in office, within a reliable constitutional framework that provided guarantees for minorities and upheld a legitimate rule of law, the knock-on effects for other states in the region could be electrifying. But so long as the main Western democracies are seen as condoning the opposite of all this uniformly throughout the region, the scattered and demoralized bearers of democratic potential within these societies will lack the reference points and capacities to link up that which would be needed to make a breakthrough anywhere.

Finally, then, although Diamond is right to argue that neither the religion nor the culture nor the society of the MENA region presents any insuperable obstacle to an eventual spread of democracy across this large region, the geopolitical and regime structural impediments are firmly embedded in the region's history and location in the international division of power. To overcome these barriers would require a powerful renewal of collective energies from below, and a substantial shift in outlook by Western governments that are currently disposed to view all such stirrings as security risks.