

# POLICY BRIEF

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## Democracy in the Middle East: Disentangling Myth from Reality

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**From Baghdad to Beirut and from Cairo to Jerusalem, stirrings of freedom are unsettling deeply entrenched autocratic Arab rulers. There is a flurry of democratic impulses creating powerful vibrations and reverberations all over the region.**



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### The Middle Eastern Context

Recently, the winds of democratic change have intensified their sweep of Middle Eastern shores. Arab civil societies are revolting against their ruling tormentors. Internal pent-up dissent, which has been gathering steam since the late 1980s, burst into the open with a vengeance. From Baghdad to Beirut and from Cairo to Jerusalem, stirrings of freedom are unsettling deeply entrenched autocratic Arab rulers. There is a flurry of democratic impulses creating powerful vibrations and reverberations all over the region. Although it is too early to draw any definite conclusions about the nature and substance of recent developments, they point to a more assertive civil society and a real longing for political empowerment and emancipation. Most Arabs and Muslims in the Middle East are fed up with their ruling autocrats who had promised heaven but delivered dust and tyranny. The new stirrings of freedom also clearly show that there is nothing unique or intrinsic about Arab and Islamic culture that inhibits democratic governance. Like their counterparts elsewhere, Arabs and Muslims have struggled to lift off the veil of political

authoritarianism covering their lives without much success, thanks to the existence of powerful dictators who were supported by the West, particularly the United States.

In a speech at the National Defense University in Washington in early March, President Bush alluded to this painful fact that is often glossed over and ignored by Western commentators. "By now it should be clear that decades of excusing and accommodating tyranny in the pursuit of stability have only led to injustice and instability and tragedy," Bush said. "It should be clear that the advance of democracy leads to peace, because governments that respect the rights of their people also respect the rights of their neighbors." Regardless of what one thinks of Bush's foreign policies, it is reassuring to hear an American president publicly acknowledge that the United States and others sometimes supported Arab dictators at the expense of their oppressed people. Although it remains to be seen if American politicians would dramatically cut their links with Arab autocrats, it does appear that they have begun to appreciate

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the inherent costs of going to bed with unsavory tyrants.

This positive rhetoric has thus far been translated into gentle political pressure against the United States' pro-Arab ruling allies. The pressure by the Bush administration has also coincided and converged with internal currents as well as social and political movements that are struggling to be free. It is this convergence between internal and external pressures that might explain the vitality and vibrancy of the new democratic stirrings in the region. American political, moral, and economic pressure, coupled with a new consensus within the international community, reinforces local aspirations for democratic transformation.

This essay argues that the current democratic changes and obstacles in the Middle East need to be understood in their full, complex historical and sociological context, and that those changes carry potential opportunities and risks as well. Although it would be misleading to link the American-led invasion and occupation of Iraq with the recent stirrings of freedom, real and genuine democratic change does require appropriate external pressure from the international community and the United States and support of all the internal players, including mainstream and enlightened Islamists. It will also be argued that if the United States works jointly with the international community, it could more successfully exert systematic political, economic, and diplomatic pressure against Arab ruling autocrats and force them to be attentive to their citizens' hopes and aspirations.

It is also about time we revisit old myths about the world of Islam, particularly the popular notion that something has gone horribly wrong for Arabs and Muslims, which accounts for their fertile

authoritarian political culture. To being with, the absence of democracy is not unique to the Muslim Middle East. Many countries in the developing world, including Africa, Latin America, and Central Asia, lack representative institutions and are ruled by autocratic leaders. Similarly, countries with predominantly Muslim populations, such as Turkey, Bangladesh, and Malaysia, are democracies. By adopting a comparative perspective, we can refute the notion that the absence of democracy is attributed to cultural or religious traits. It also allows us to understand the structure of states that have adopted many of the characteristics of their colonial predecessors.

At the heart of the problem in the developing world, including Middle Eastern countries, lays the fact that the new elite that assumed power after the end of colonialism came mostly from the military-security apparatus, one that is deeply hierarchical, rigid, and authoritarian. The colonial state invested many more resources in the military-security apparatus than in other civil-legal institutions because of the need to maintain political and economic control over restive indigenous societies. It is little wonder that in the eyes of many Muslims and Arabs, as well as Africans and Asians, democracy was, and still is to a large extent, seen as synonymous with Western political and economic dominance and power.

By the time Britain and France ended their formal direct control over Arab/Muslim societies in the 1950s and 1960s, the only existing viable institutions revolved around military-security forces. In most Arab/Muslim countries, including Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, and Libya, young army officers launched coup-d'états and seized power from the regimes affiliated with the

loathed British and French colonialists. For example, Egyptian Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, who toppled the monarchy, dominated the political landscape and tightened his grip on state and society. More than any other Arab leader, Nasser institutionalized and legitimized military rule in the eyes of many Arabs/Muslims. In this context, we must not shy away from raising a critical question: To what extent did the colonial state's conduct alienate people further from Western constitutionalism and the concept of representative government?

### The Internal Struggle

To critique the colonial state does not imply that the Arab ruling elite should not be held accountable for its dismal failure to construct and consolidate representative institutions. Accountability and responsibility lies first and foremost at home, squarely at the shoulders of autocratic Arab leaders. The post-colonial state has used corruption to buy off social groups, professionals, and important segments of society. Since the state is the biggest employer in society, leading social classes remain economically dependent on the state and at the mercy of its largess. No independent, large middle class has emerged thus far, though we are witnessing the emergence of rudimentary social movements that could dramatically revolutionize Arab and Muslim politics. The new social movements, be they professional associations, workers organizations, students, women groups, among others, are much more assertive, mobilized, and challenging of governments' autocratic methods, thanks to the power of the New Media, which has broken official monopoly on the flow of information. One of the major characteristics of the new social movements is their democratic sensibility and diversity.

In the last decade, the further economic weakening of Middle Eastern states has brought dissatisfied forces, which call for more individual rights and personal freedoms, to the fore. Furthermore, Islamists – political activists who aim to abolish secular, social, and political order and replace it with an Islamic one – are the main beneficiaries of the decline of the post-colonial state. Of all the social and political groups, Islamists tend to be the best organized and most successful in building large constituencies, thanks to the social and economic services they provide to a pressed population. Islamists also utilize traditional forms of identity – the mosque and religious symbolism – and exaggerate the dangers posed by globalization and westernization to identity and authenticity. Ironically, the ruling autocrats have fortified Islamists by forfeiting their socioeconomic mandate and bringing the ship of the state to the sinking point with everyone on board. Instead of directly tackling the existential crisis facing their societies, secular Arab rulers use and abuse the fear of Islamism to perpetuate their control and maintain the status quo.

The most effective means to deal with Islamism is not less democracy, but more liberalization and democracy. By gradually opening up the political systems and by nourishing a vibrant civil society, independent and organized political groups – democrats, liberals, conservatives, nationalists – would act as a parallel current and a counterbalance to Islamists in society. The most effective measures to counter ultra-conservative religious forces lay in institutionalizing Arab and Muslim civil society groups and leveling the political field. Nonetheless, Arab rulers must be held accountable for bankrupting the state and causing the moral malaise that inflicts society, as well as for being Islamists' unwitting allies. But they take no personal or moral responsibility for

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their actions. We are told that the colonial legacy and external conspiracies by the Zionists and their sinister allies are entirely to blame!

#### **The Western Factor**

Unfortunately, in the minds of many Arabs and Muslims, liberal democracy has become synonymous with Western political hegemony and domination. Western hostility toward Islam and Muslims is taken as an article of faith among Arabs/Muslims. It is even believed that calls by the Western powers, particularly the United States, to promote and to spread democracy in the region is no more than a ploy to perpetuate and consolidate their hegemony over Arab-Muslim lands and resources. Equating liberal democracy with Western hostility toward Islam and Muslims has done considerable damage to the concept and values of liberalization and democratization in that part of the world. Thus, instead of being viewed as a panacea to political authoritarianism and tyranny in the Muslim world, democracy tends to be seen as a manipulative tool and instrument wielded by Western powers to intervene in Arab/Muslim internal affairs and to divide and conquer.

There are two particularly problematic issues that must be addressed. The first revolves around the need to deconstruct and to debunk the hypothesis of Western hostility toward Islam and Muslims. Westerners are not intrinsically or naturally hostile to Islam and Muslims, even though Islamophobia is on the rise in the West and has gained momentum after the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s, and particularly after the September 11 attacks on the United States. Since the early 1990s, an alarming thesis that a clash of cultures or civilizations is inevitable has resonated within Western imagination.

There are some scholars, politicians, and activists who assert that the Christian West and the world of Islam are bound to clash, and that this conflict is rooted in cultural and religious differences. Doomsday-sayers are beating the drum of an impending confrontation that is fueled by real historical and civilizational fault lines between Muslims and Christians.

A point of clarification is in order here. Those doomsday-sayers remain a minority in the West and do not reflect or represent the diverse and complex attitudes of Westerners and Americans. It is crucial not to exaggerate the importance of what I call the confrontationalists or hardliners in the West and not to view them as mainstream, lest we play into their hands and fulfill their prophecy. In turn, Arabs and Muslims must also recognize that Westerners are not inherently antagonistic to their religion and culture, just as they themselves are not intrinsically or naturally hostile toward Westerners. There are diverse constituencies and shades of opinions in Western societies, and it would be misleading and counterproductive to perceive the West as a monolithic block with one single view. In fact, most Arabs and Muslims can positively or negatively influence Western public opinion through their words and actions.

The other problem with buying into the hypothesis of Western enmity toward Arabs and Muslims is that it reinforces the latter's suspicion and hostility toward the institutions of liberal democracy. It is a deadly cycle of reinforcing mutual misperceptions. Terminology and language matter. Arab and Muslim activists and religious scholars must use their own language to articulate the concept of democracy, as well as sell it to a highly unreceptive audience. To do so, they must find an acceptable

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philosophical and social vision to claim ownership over the concept of democracy. Within the past ten years, a major struggle has been unfolding in the world of Islam among liberal, democratic, and mainstream voices on the one hand, and ruling autocrats on the other. The former have been working arduously to redefine liberal democracy in Islamic terms and make it comprehensible, accessible, and acceptable to Arab/Muslim masses. Simply put, Muslim and Islamic democrats have been trying to Islamize democracy and modernity and strip them of their Western dress.

A consensus is emerging in the Muslim world regarding respect for human

thought. Rather, they portray democracy as belonging to a universal heritage. As such, it is not only compatible with Islamic values, but could also be tailored to the needs and concerns of Arab and Muslim societies. Mainstream Islamists, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the most powerful transnational organization, have now come to this very same conclusion – democracy is the most effective mechanism to guard against political authoritarianism and protect the human rights of the Muslim Ummah (the Muslim community worldwide).

The key point to stress is that Islamic activists and Muslim democrats are trying to find ways and means to

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rights, the transparency of the rule of law, and the peaceful transfer to political power. These goods are seen as crucial to overcoming and resolving the existential crisis facing Arabs/ Muslims. There is no doubt that the winds of change are sweeping Muslim lands, and the genie is out of the bottle. Muslim scholars, activists, and civil society leaders are challenging the very structure of the political authoritarian order. A great deal of ink is spilled on terminology and definition. Fully aware of the negative connotations of liberal democracy in the minds of Arabs and Muslims, Islamic and Muslim scholars and intellectuals convincingly argue that democracy does not have to be synonymous with Western liberal

surmount the imagined or real problem of Western hostility toward Islam and Muslims. Although they have come far, the journey is just beginning. Islamicizing liberal democracy is still a work in progress. A great deal of hard work remains to be done. As yet, there exists no rich or complex repertoire philosophizing about democracy in the Muslim world. There also exists no critical discourse on toleration or on the relationship between the secular and the sacred. Little has been done on the separation of religion and politics, which is a highly explosive mix that threatens to wreck the whole conceptual democratic enterprise and stifle it at birth.

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### Deconstructing Islamophobia and Anti-Westernism?

It is understandable that Muslim civil society leaders and mainstream Islamists have been trying to disassociate democracy from Western political thought and to make it acceptable to the Muslim masses. However, they still face another fundamental problem – how to reduce anti-Western sentiments that are entrenched in certain ultra-conservative societal and religious circles in the Muslim world. Thus, there exists a two-pronged dialectic: anti-Muslim sentiments in the Christian West and anti-Western sentiments in the world of Islam, which run parallel. Although it is legitimate that Muslim civil society leaders call on the West to rid itself of its rising Islamophobia, there is also an urgent need for them to publicly and critically address a similar rising of anti-Westernism in their region. In particular, anti-Americanism has become widespread among politically conscious groups. Although the root causes of anti-Americanism stem from foreign policy, not culture or society, it has unfortunately acquired the status of an ideology. Islamists, leftists, and conservative secularists sometimes sound as anti-American as radical nationalists and jihadis.

It is one thing to be critical of American foreign policy, but it is another to blame these policies for the ills and misfortunes that have befallen the Muslim world in the past half-century. This question is not just an academic one because it has implications for the prospects of liberalization and democratization of the Middle Eastern region. In the eyes and minds of many Arabs and Muslims, now democracy is inextricably linked to American values and, as such, they are prepared to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Thus,

tackling the question of anti-Westernism and anti-Americanism is essential to making democracy palatable to an Arab and Muslim audience. It is not enough to de-link democracy from its Western liberal heritage. There is also an urgent need to separate criticism of Western and American foreign policies from Western values. This challenge is proving to be a difficult balancing act.

All the public surveys taken in Muslim countries show that pluralities of Arabs and Muslims tend to separate their criticism of American foreign policies from Western values. But the reality on the ground is much more complex than that. The rhetoric of anti-Americanism is so widespread and intense that it distorts perceptions and critical reflections. Many Arabs and Muslims find it difficult to separate their criticism of Western and American foreign policies from their mistrust of democracy, which is viewed as a Western import. They are not only deeply suspicious of the promotion of democracy by the Bush administration, but also fear that democracy is being used as a ploy to penetrate their societies and consolidate American hegemony over their lives. Many Arabs and Muslims to whom I have spoken say they have little confidence in the United States' commitment to human rights and liberalism and are deeply skeptical about its promotion of democracy. There is a tendency to confuse the message with the messenger.

A real danger exists that Arabs and Muslims believe that democracy has become synonymous with the United States' crusading, imperial impulse. We should not underestimate the damage done to the concept and idea of democracy by it having been associated with loathed policies of the Bush

administration. Therefore, it is very misleading to claim that President Bush's adoption of democracy as a critical platform of his foreign policy is contributing to the promotion of the democratic project in the Arab and Muslim world. No causal link can be drawn between the new wave of stirrings of freedom there and Bush's rhetorical commitment to democracy.

There exists widespread apprehension and suspicion of Bush's intentions and policies throughout Arab and Muslim lands. Many Arabs and Muslims are reluctant to buy what they perceive to be his unauthentic and faulty democratic goods. They view his rhetoric as a means to justify and legitimize his illegal invasion of Iraq to the American people, as well as to wage a relentless war against Arabs and Muslims. It is worth mentioning that Middle Eastern societies place a great premium on independence from external powers and are very protective of their sovereignty. Most Arabs and Muslims are keenly aware of their countries' bloody colonial past. Leading social and political groups vehemently oppose intervention by the great powers, particularly the United States, in their internal affairs under any pretext, including that of spreading of democracy.

Muslim liberal and democratic voices are so anxious about public backlash against American intervention in their countries' internal affairs that they do not want to be seen as associated with U.S. foreign policies. They prefer that the international community led by the United Nations, not the United States, lead the drive for promoting democratic governance in the area. They know well that Arab dictators are obsessed with maintaining absolute control over their societies. They also know that these autocratic leaders will not liberalize or democratize on their own without being

pressured to do so by the world community.

Accordingly, progressive voices within the region prefer an internationalist approach, not a unilateralist American approach, to assist them in their quest to reach the safe harbor of freedom and democracy. To be blunt: No, Arabs and Muslims are not waiting for an American president à la George W. Bush to clear away the corruption and dictatorship that curse the region. Few will wager on an American foreign policy that has a vested interest in supporting pliant Arab dictators. In their eyes, the United States cannot take risks on authentic democratic voices because they threaten its primary interests and hegemony. Instead, people in the region prefer the larger international community, particularly the United Nations and the European Union, to take the lead in exerting pressure on Muslim dictators to open up their political systems.

Unfortunately, the American-led invasion and occupation of Iraq reinforced the people's worst fears toward the Bush administration's aggressive and hostile foreign policy. Far from viewing the overthrow of Saddam Hussein as a harbinger of a new democratic era, many Arabs/Muslims fear that Iraq could descend into chaos and sectarian strife that could spill over into neighboring countries. Few Arabs buy the Bush administration's line about bringing democracy into Iraq and to Iraqis. The escalating security problem, along with the prison abuse scandals as well as human right violations of Iraqi citizens by American soldiers, further fueled anger and anti-American sentiment in the region. The American venture in Iraq has done considerable damage to relations between the United States and Middle Eastern societies. It also did

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For all these reasons, the promotion of liberalism and democratization must be accompanied by a genuine and systematic struggle to deal with the root causes and manifestations of the rising Islamophobia in the Christian West and deepening anti-American sentiments in the Muslim world. Although the jury is still out regarding the prospects of democracy in Iraq, Arabs and Muslims worldwide have already made up their minds and have found the United States guilty of wrecking havoc in Iraq and in the rest of the region. They remain deeply suspicious of the administration's military and political mission in Iraq and can see no ray of hope at the end of the Iraqi tunnel.

#### Problems with Chaos Theory

After the elections were held in Iraq and after millions of Iraqis defied insurgents and cast their votes, the Bush administration seized that historical moment as a legitimate verdict on its invasion and destruction of the Iraqi Baathist regime. Bush aides also saw the Iraqi elections as a referendum on the President's championing of democracy in Iraq and throughout Arab and Muslim lands. Some Bush administration advisers and allies have since argued that the reverberations from the Iraqi elections are bound to destroy the iron walls of political autocracy and tyranny in the Arab world. The dominant wisdom in American policy-making and the media is that the idea of liberating the Iraqi people and enabling them to freely choose their own government is already echoing powerfully on the Arab streets. They say, look at the elections in Palestine that resulted in the election of the

moderate Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. They say, look at how ordinary Palestinians are questioning the utility and usefulness of suicide bombings against Israel.

Bush aides and supporters remind us that the Iraqi elections are even affecting political developments in Egypt, one of the most populous and important Arab states. They claim that the reason why Egyptians are becoming more vocal in their criticism of President Hosni Mubarak's autocratic style is mainly due to political developments in Iraq and President Bush's emphatic and systemic pressure on Arab governments to respect the wishes of their citizens. Bush's aides and supporters point to the peaceful intifada in Lebanon against Syria's military and political dominance over their country as a direct product of the liberation of the Iraqi people from their tyrannical regime. We are told that even the fundamentalist Saudi royal family is finally trying to accommodate the political aspirations of its subjects by holding the country's first municipal elections this year. These officials and pundits assert that none of these democratic openings, humble as they are, would have taken place without the destruction of the oppressive regime in Baghdad and the liberation of the Iraqi people. The moral lesson in their eyes: social chaos is good for the promotion of democracy and structural change in the Muslim Middle East. We are told something dramatic and violent had to happen to threaten the political hegemony of ruling autocrats over their subjugated populations and to embolden democratic forces to stand up and demand a freer political environment. Although the American-led invasion of Iraq was costly in blood and treasure, the Bush administration and its supporters see it as a powerful catalyst that is changing Iraq as well as the entire region.



Although compelling, the chaos theory is a hypothesis that has not yet been proven, and it is invested with more conceptual and empirical meanings than it deserves. To begin with, chaos in Iraq competes with political progress. The costs of the American invasion and occupation of Iraq are devastating for Iraqi civilians and the American military. Tens of thousands of Iraqis, along with 1,500 American soldiers, have been killed so far. The security situation remains highly volatile and the Sunni Arab community, which represents about 20 percent of the population, feels excluded and marginalized. The Sunni Arabs are leading the insurgency and are supplying it with tens of thousands of recruits. Far from being a democracy, Iraq has a long, complex, and risky journey before it gets transformed into a real democracy. Iraqis also remain deeply divided over the future direction of their country. The jury is still out regarding the prospects of stability, let alone democracy, in the still war-torn country.

It is also conceptually problematic to try to draw causal links between the American-led invasion of Iraq and the stirrings of freedom sweeping Arab and Muslim lands. It is important to keep in mind that for the past two decades, Arabs and Muslims have been struggling against their ruling dictators to make them show respect for human rights and the rule of law. For the last two decades globalization and the "new media" have weakened governments' control over their citizens and the latter can no longer control the flow of information as before. These two variables have played a vital role in the democratic ferment sweeping the Middle East. It would be very tragic indeed to credit the Bush administration for bringing about the recent promising democratic stirrings rather than

courageous, democratic Muslim voices, which paid dearly, sometimes with their lives, for struggling against local tyrants. Most of the credit deserves to be given to those Arab and Muslim individuals who, though oppressed, have never lost faith in their struggle to lift and free themselves.

Just as important, the new stirrings of freedom in Beirut, Cairo, Riyadh, Tripoli, Damascus, Amman, Tehran, and other Arab and Muslim capitals do not rationalize and justify the costly American-led invasion and occupation of Iraq. Even if the American war in Iraq was partially responsible for these new developments – the total cause of which remains an open-ended question – it cannot justify the high costs in blood and loss for Iraqis and Americans.

But, to say that the American-led invasion in Iraq was not mainly responsible for the new winds of democratic change in the region is not to deny the contribution made by the Bush administration for the promising regional landscape. After September 11, American politicians have come to appreciate that Arab dictators represent a strategic liability to the maintenance of long-term American vital interests in the region. They now recognize, as President Bush reiterated more than once, that supporting autocrats has done considerable damage to the United States' status, image, and interests in the region. One of the major grievances that the Arab and Muslim population has against American foreign policy is its support for their ruling tormentors.

#### Recommendations

There is no denying that there is fresh thinking in Washington regarding the need to support the aspirations of

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democratic voices in the area, as well as to keep a healthy distance from Arab dictators. In a sense, tragic as they were, the September 11 attacks served as a catalyst to bring about a strategic shift, at least on the polemical level, in how the American foreign policy establishment views and interacts with Arab and Muslim societies. Only time will tell if this appreciation gets institutionalized within the American decision-making process, or whether American policymakers will ultimately revert to the easy, simple, old ways of doing business-as-usual with Arab dictators. For now, the rhetoric coming out from Washington is refreshing, and carries tremendous potential for American foreign policy and Middle Eastern societies alike.

I would argue further that the United States could be much more effective if it worked jointly with the international community in assisting progressive forces in the region. With the support of a broad international coalition, the United States could more successfully exert systematic political, economic, and diplomatic pressure against Arab ruling autocrats and force them to be attentive to their citizens' hopes and aspirations. This complex multilateral approach would produce the desired effects much more effectively than military preemption à la Iraq. It would also reduce anti-Americanism in the region and reassure mainstream Arab and Muslim public opinion that the United States is genuine about a peaceful democratic

transformation and does not possess hegemonic designs on their countries and resources.

One would hope that the Bush administration has learned useful lessons from its debacle in Iraq, one of the most important of which is that chaos is not conducive to progressive, democratic change in the Middle East. One would also hope that the Bush administration fully recognizes that the United States can serve as a catalyst for good in the region and elsewhere if it listens closely to the aspirations, hopes, and fears of people. The United States must reclaim its high moral position by supporting genuine democratic forces and ending its cozy relations with dictators. The Bush administration must also be consistent in its promotion of liberalization and democratization by exerting pressure on friends and foes alike to respect the human rights of their citizens.

The United States must also recognize that actions speak louder than words, and that institution building requires the resolution of simmering regional conflicts, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, and reducing socio-economic inequities that are breeding grounds for militancy and extremism. It is only then that this exceptional historical moment may be translated into a concrete political reality, whereby the Muslim Middle East can undergo real and genuine democratic transformation.

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