

The False Promise of Arab Liberals

By [Jon B. Alterman](#)

Jon B. Alterman is director of the Middle East program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

In the months and years since September 11, the idea that the United States should be more active in promoting democracy in the Arab world has become commonplace. President Bush dedicated an entire speech to the subject on November 6, 2003 after raising the theme for almost a year. The president's embrace of the idea followed months of pronouncements by senior U.S. government officials that addressed the need for political change in the Arab world — for American interests as well as those of the people in the region — and the need for the U.S. government to play an active role promoting such change.

It is not to dispute the desirability of democratization and reform in the Arab world to point out that the U.S. government is going about it the wrong way. The U.S. strategy, as it has been executed, is based on building out from a core of like-minded liberal reformers in the Arab world. In many ways, it is an obvious way to start. As a group, such reformers are intelligent, congenial, well-educated, and English-speaking. Americans are comfortable with them, and they are comfortable with Americans.

But if we are honest with ourselves, we need to recognize that, as a group, such liberals are increasingly aging, increasingly isolated, and diminishing in number. These liberals are losing a battle for the hearts and minds of their countries, and populations are increasingly driven toward younger and more disaffected personalities.

America's problems do not stop there, however. The United States faces a paradox. Liberal reformers in much of the Arab world are already seen as clients of foreign powers and as collaborators in a Western effort to weaken and

dominate the Arab world. Focusing attention and resources on these reformers runs the risk of isolating them still further, driving a deeper wedge between them and the societies we (and they) seek to affect. In such an event, U.S. efforts are not only ineffectual; they are counterproductive.

U.S. efforts to promote political openness and change in the Arab world would be far more effective if they stopped trying to coax the disparate sparks of comfortable liberal thought into a flame and instead concentrated on two targets: regional governments and mass publics. The U.S. also needs to be willing to work multilaterally to promote reform in a way it has been unwilling to do up to now. If the stakes were lower, the U.S. could afford the luxury of taking an easier and less effective approach to political change in the Arab world. In today's environment, it isn't nearly sufficient.

The Eastern European example

In current talk about efforts to reform political life in the Middle East, the Eastern European example looms large. Not only did Eastern European communism crumble after almost decades of Western effort, but the end of the Soviet Union spelled the diminution, if not the end, of what had been the primary strategic threat facing the United States for a half-century.

At its core, the Eastern European experience is thought of this way: Communist tyranny spread while Western nations kept alive a flickering hope of freedom through overt radio broadcasting, covert support for oppositionists and "prisoners of conscience," and constant government-to-government pressure on human rights and political freedom. A robust policy of public diplomacy and cultural exchanges revealed the obvious: that communist lies about poverty in the West were just that, and the communist world was falling farther and farther behind a rapidly industrializing West.

On the governmental level, the Soviet quagmire in Afghanistan combined with the Reagan administration's stepped-up military spending to provoke an internal crisis. On the public level, a series of initiatives to support nongovernmental groups hastened the collapse of corroded and crumbling governments in country after country.

Veteran Cold Warriors view their victory as the product of determination and vision. Unwilling to accommodate authoritarianism, they insisted on a policy of tireless confrontation with the Soviet Union and its clients. Unwilling to accept the inevitability of autocracy, they imagined a future for Eastern Europe that would be capitalist and free. The names of many of the most dedicated of these warriors are familiar today: Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, Elliott Abrams.

But what of the Middle East? After September 11, 2001, strategic thinkers proclaimed millennial Islamist terrorism to be the preeminent strategic threat facing the United States. But while the Cold War represented a confrontation *between* governments, this new battle was one brought on by the *failure of* governments. As President Bush explained in London in November 2003, "In democratic and successful societies, men and women do not swear their allegiance to malcontents and murderers, they turn their hearts and labor to building better lives." He continued, "By advancing freedom in the greater Middle East, we help end a cycle of dictatorship and radicalism that brings millions of people to misery and brings danger to our own people." The tools imagined are much the same as those used in the Cold War: pressure on governments and fanning the flames of freedom, liberalism, and democracy throughout the Middle East.

While it is obvious to say that the Middle East is not Eastern Europe, it is unsettling to consider just how different the two environments are and how little these differences are acknowledged.

The role of elites

It is useful to start, perhaps, by thinking about the roles of elites vis-à-vis governments. Elites play many roles, but one of the most important for the purposes of the present discussion is their role of mediation. Elites often serve as a lubricant between foreign and domestic systems, using commonalities in travel, education, and language to bridge national divisions. The period of Western imperialism in the Middle East spanned most of the first half of the twentieth century, and in many countries it merely followed four centuries of Ottoman imperial rule. Throughout, elites played an important collaborative function. "Collaboration" here is not meant pejoratively, but rather in the way suggested by that great historian of British imperialism, Ronald Robinson, who writes of "two interconnecting sets of linkages . . . one consisting of arrangements between the agents of industrial society and the indigenous elites drawn into cooperation with them; and the other connecting these elites to the rigidities of local interests and institutions."¹

Early twentieth-century Levantine elites were a worldly bunch, often multilingual and tolerant if often also a bit corrupt. Under their guidance, parliaments arose throughout the region, often unifying on the need to end European colonial rule. But as we know, in the Middle East many of the stories of the elites ended badly. Tales of self-indulgence and profligate spending on their part only sharpened dismay at the Arab world's continued subjugation to European powers. Collaboration did take on a negative coloration as the elites were seen as too feckless to win true independence. The elites' sins, in the eyes of many, were exemplified by the creation of the state of Israel, widely seen to be a

solution to a European problem on the back of a weak and divided Arab nation.

When nationalist revolutions swept the Arab world in the 1950s, those revolutions were a repudiation of that weakness. Elites were tossed out as foreign fops, and new indigenous elites — Manfred Halpern's much-vaunted "new middle class" — set about defining a new and "truly authentic" form of Arabism.

In truth, traditional Arab elites have never recovered the high ground. Widely perceived to be agents of foreign interests — however one construes "foreign" in an Arab context — the old families have clawed their way back to influence but have done so largely on the terms of their tormentors. Liberalism remains suspect, part of a Western plot to weaken and subjugate rather than strengthen and liberate. Elite messengers and their messages remain besmirched. Compare this to Eastern Europe, where it was the communists whose utilitarian socialist universalism was a foreign import. While one cannot quite point to a golden democratic past, there was not a sense in Eastern Europe that the patrimony of liberal thinking was weakness and foreign domination.

In addition, the role that elites play in any society is changing, driven by communications technology and a surge in popular culture. One need not accept the idea of a single global village to appreciate the familiarity — or at least perceived familiarity — many people feel with societies half a world away from them. Whereas the old elites transcended the local through their travel and knowledge of foreign languages, newly emergent elites participate in a global culture or at least regional cultures that may have little to do with dominant European-derived paradigms. The collaborative role that traditional elites have played is less mysterious, and the interests of foreign powers are more obvious to local audiences.

The rise of an increasingly independent popular culture has an important effect on our discussion. Elites have lost much of the agenda-setting role they enjoyed in years past. What matters most in attracting an audience now is having a message, not merely having an outlet. Stolid state-run broadcasters have seen their audiences desert them, and they have had to change what they do. Audiences now control what they pay attention to, not information bureaucrats. The broadcaster with his finger on the pulse of the public mood, not the one with the ear of the information minister, plays the primary agenda-setting role in modern Arab societies. Such communication is increasingly unmediated as television brings arguments and rebuttals straight into the living rooms of its viewers.

In an environment overflowing with clashing ideas that easily cross borders, it has long seemed that much of Arab discourse is centering around an idea of

defining what is “authentically Arab.” For years, part of such an identity involved support for the Palestinian cause; but in recent years, the explosion of communication from the grass roots has created competing notions of everything from music and style to religious practice, all of which affect people’s daily lives. The Arab world is no more likely to arrive at a single conclusion about what it is to be an Arab than Americans are to arrive at a conclusion about what it is to be an American. Yet just as an effort to define what it is to be a “true American” simultaneously creates categories of people and behaviors that are considered by many to be “un-American,” a similar process in the Arab world creates definitions of what is “un-Arab.” Because of the legacy suggested above, old liberal elite views of a just Arab society often fall outside the bounds of Arabs’ imagined common future.

Many heirs to the liberal elite tradition in the Arab world live and work in Washington, dc. They often fill posts in the World Bank and other international institutions, work for the U.S. government, or labor in academia. They despair of the misdirection of the Arab world, and they speak movingly of the need for change. We notice their accents when they speak English, and we hail them as authentic voices for change in the Middle East. But what Washington doesn’t hear is that many of these people have accents when they speak Arabic as well. Their speech marks them as Arabs who have left, who have fundamentally compromised or been compromised. One colleague used the evocative phrase “native aliens” to describe them; their most valuable commodity is that they simultaneously hold Western ideas and non-Western passports.²

In academic circles in the early 1990s, it was hard not to hear of Nawal al-Saadawi, the prominent Egyptian feminist, novelist, and physician who fled her own country under death threats. But I will never forget the words of one of my Egyptian professors, a prominent female professional in her own right. At the mere mention of Saadawi’s name, my professor practically spit in disgust saying (in Arabic), “She doesn’t belong to us. She belongs to you.”

Three additional points are in order. The first is to make clear that not all Arab liberals come from elite backgrounds. A good number — although probably a minority still — come from modest backgrounds. But the fact remains that support for liberal ideals as they are promoted and articulated in the West remains almost entirely an elite province, whether that of those born into elites or those who have come to pass into such ranks. What we often refer to as “like-minded individuals” form a distinctive group, and a decidedly elitist one.

The second point is that as old elites are pushed aside, new elites are emerging. Such elites come from religious backgrounds, the media, the military, or some combination. What is important to note here is that the new elites tend to come from sectors of their societies that are often illiberal, while old liberal elites are

increasingly marginalized.

The last point has to do with the remarkable passivity of many Arab liberals, who either throw up their hands or hope that the U.S. will deliver their countries to them. Conservative groups conduct an active, creative, and impressive array of activities and services that affect peoples' daily lives: providing care to the sick, food to the hungry, and spouses to the unmarried. They seek leadership positions in professional organizations and civic groups. All too often, Arab liberals' activity ends when they deliver copy to their editors.

A world apart

What is happening in the Arab world today smacks a bit of what the sociologist William Julius Wilson described as happening in black neighborhoods in Chicago in the 1960s and 1970s. Whereas segregation had created all-black communities that had both rich and poor, desegregation created black communities that were uniformly poor and had far higher incidences of violence and crime than had obtained heretofore. In the Arab world, liberal elites cluster ever more closely around Western embassies in capital cities and work in international institutions while the bulk of the Arab world grows more angry, more desperate, and more estranged from those liberal elites with whom Western governments deal most often.

U.S. government interest in working for political change in the Middle East is sincere, but there is a severe shortage of ideas as to how that might be done. Surely it was not lost on anyone in the Arab world that the president's speech on democratization in the Arab world was long on vision and remarkably short on implementation. There was a brief ruffle of excitement in May 2003 when the word went out that the president was going to announce the culmination of a long series of nsc meetings on better engaging with the Arab world at a commencement address at the University of South Carolina. The result was a modest proposal to work for a Middle East Free Trade Agreement in 10 years — one that, if achieved, would be completed three years after a similar European initiative is scheduled to conclude. While there is a desire to do something, exactly what often falls short.

Where we have seen some movement is out of the State Department, where the year-old, \$129 million Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) is beginning to take root. MEPI has identified economic cooperation as an initial step toward respect for rule of law, transparency, and an end to cronyism, but many of the partnership's first efforts have been in the fields of conferences and training. Urgency in getting the partnership up and running has meant grasping for low-hanging fruit, and an overwhelming push for women's empowerment has helped ensure that participation is limited mostly to capital city elites. One of the

newest programs is, I think, typical. The U.S. Business Internship for Young Arab Women seeks 40 women between 22 and 30 with high proficiency in English to live in the U.S. for three to six months. However desirable this may look from a U.S. standpoint, the number of women with such English skills is quite limited — yet not nearly as limited as the number whose families, both mothers and fathers, would consider it appropriate for their daughters to live independently overseas at such a tender point in their lives. While the intent is noble, anyone with even a passing knowledge of the Middle East must recognize what a small segment of Arab society would benefit from such a program. And there is a chilling statistic: of 24 civil society organizations listed as “partners” on the MEPI website, only one wholly Arab organization is among them.

MEPI is, of course, an overlay on other existing aid programs in the Middle East, run either by USAID, U.S. embassies, or both. In case after case, such programs are directed toward the activities of what can only seem to be a client class of Western-educated elites whose governments permit such activities so long as they remain politically inert. In Jordan, the embassy supports a panoply of semi-royal charities like the Noor Al Hussein Foundation, the Royal Society for the Preservation of Nature, and others. Indeed, Jordan’s so-called nongovernmental organizations are so tightly tied into the government that they gave rise to the acronym “gongo,” meaning “government-organized nongovernmental organization.” In the words of one friend in the White House, the typical aid recipient in the Middle East is the son of an ambassador, with a German mother, who happens to run an NGO.

A different approach

What is the solution? Not more of the same. Doing so is likely to exacerbate U.S. problems rather than solve them, driving deeper wedges between those with whom the United States seeks to work and those whose attitudes it seeks to influence. Liberal elites are not proving to be successful opinion leaders in their own communities, and closer ties to the West often serve to estrange them from, rather than embed them in, such communities. Think about it as a plant: If all of the sun and all of the nutrients come from one direction, it will not grow tall and strong — it will be weak and bent, and no amount of food or sunlight will make it right as long as it all comes from a single direction.

Greater tolerance, transparency, and openness in the Middle East would indeed serve U.S. interests, and it would serve the interests of the people of the Middle East as well. But to be effective, efforts must be concentrated in three areas. The first is on the government-to-government level. As countless U.S. government officials have recognized, the U.S. government cannot go on doing what it has been doing, relegating reform issues to the bottom of a long list of agenda items for bilateral discussions. But in order to implement such a program effectively,

we need to be alert to two dangers. The first is that it will fall into the trap of excusing repression as a necessary part of the war on terrorism. Foreign governments know U.S. sensitivity on this issue, and they will attempt to use it to excuse a range of abuses. The U.S. government should not take the bait.

The second is that the U.S. government needs to push consistently and aggressively for greater freedom of association in the Middle East, even for those whose views it finds despicable. While governments' sensitivity to U.S. intervention in their domestic politics is understandable, the veto that some exercise over any nongovernmental group taking money from overseas is unacceptable.

The second area of work is with broader publics. The U.S. government needs to have far more modest goals with far broader segments of the population in the Arab world. The depth and breadth of animus against the U.S. poisons the environment for any values the U.S. espouses, and merely neutralizing some of this opposition would represent a significant advance.

In order to pursue such a strategy, the U.S. would need to work with an array of nontraditional partners. Some may say things the U.S. government doesn't agree with on issues relating to women, Israel, or any of a number of other issues. The U.S. government needs to abandon the idea that cooperation with an individual or group means embracing their every belief. It need not and should not. In addition, the U.S. will have to move away from accounting rules that pose an intimidating, if not impenetrable, barrier to many groups. Fiduciary responsibility is necessary, but it must be a tool to promote accountability rather than a barrier to action.

Another area to think about in this regard is stepping up activities of American organizations that have nothing to do with the U.S. embassy in a particular country. Corporations, foundations, ngos, and a range of other groups could carry out activities successfully without the imprimatur — or encumbrances — of official U.S. government endorsement. The U.S. government should vigorously pursue such strategies on their own merits, as well as to get around some of the problems mentioned above.

A third area of activity is coordinating more with other countries and groups of countries, particularly the European Union. Europeans share a quite similar analysis of trends in the Arab world yet are more alarmed because they see large expatriate populations in their own countries threatening domestic security. Despite the deep commonality of goals between the Middle East Partnership Initiative and the Barcelona Process, neither side understands the other much. There are at least two advantages to cooperation with the eu. The first is that the eu doesn't carry the stigma in the Middle East that U.S. policy does, making it a

less threatening actor on the domestic stages of the region. Equally important, however, coordinated pressure and incentives stand a far better chance of working than competing ones, diminishing the possibility that targeted countries would seek to play the United States and the European Union off against each other and increasing the likely efficacy of outside efforts.

What should one do with Arab liberals in all of this? None of this is to argue that the U.S. government should abandon them or cast them off. They continue to play valuable roles in our society and in their countries of origin. But Americans need to recognize that such liberals are insufficient catalysts for the change that all agree is necessary. Stepped-up U.S. support of them runs the risk of drawing them even further out from the societies we seek to influence, isolating them and pulling such societies even further from the directions in which we want them to go.

Most necessary in all of the U.S. efforts are two things. The first is a healthy understanding of the limits of U.S. abilities. The second is remembering how others' over-reliance on our role to promote change diminishes the likelihood of change in two ways: by delegitimizing it as inauthentic and by breeding comfort, complacency, or passivity in those among whom action is most directly needed.

There is another challenge facing the U.S. as well, and that is remembering that what is important is not how things sound and feel in Washington, but how they sound and feel in the Middle East. In their classic book *Africa and the Victorians* (St. Martin's Press, 1961), Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher observed that, "In the end it was the idea and the analysis of African situations in Whitehall, and not the realities in Africa as such which moved Victorian statesmen to act or not to act." With so much high-level interest in the Middle East, the U.S. runs the risk of being guided by conventional wisdom rather than true knowledge. In that event, the outcomes would almost certainly be worse than many in Washington agree they need to be.

Notes

¹ Ronald Robinson, "Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism," in Roger Owen and Bob Sutcliffe, eds., *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism* (London: Longman, 1972), 121.

² I am grateful to Hakan Yavuz at the University of Utah for this phrase, although I absolve him of any responsibility for the other ideas expressed here.

<http://www.policyreview.org/>