

Editorial

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Democratization is essentially a process of context transformation. This issue of ConflictINFOCUS addresses the current calls for democracy and political liberalization in the MENA region. Such calls have recently acquired strategic importance in the region as a preventive tool to contain mainly intra-state and inter-state conflicts as well. Democracy and political liberalization is nothing but a gradual change in contexts, a change built on conscious attempts by both governments and people to improve and hasten the processes of democratization, good governance, and liberalization at large.

Acknowledging the role awaiting Arab governments and highlighting the effect of democratization on intra-societal conflicts would enable experts to draw a broader picture about what needs to be done in this part of the world in order to develop this process. Central to the region also is the strategic importance of conflict prevention instruments in order to contain conflict in the region. As a tool for development, democratization would entail a series of policies that would contain possible interstate conflicts that may arise as a result of inequalities and oppression. Good governance and political liberalization are the pillars for early action in order to contain emerging conflicts in the region. Oppression and extremism have emerged in the MENA region as a result of improper political mechanisms and partial reform. Arab governments, thus, are advised to adopt innovative measures to combat conflict-instigating factors in their societies.

This issue of ConflictINFOCUS sheds light on Arab governments' responsibility in empowering the process of democratization. Two articles in this issue tackle directly and indirectly the governments' responsibility for a successful democratization: Charles Kiamie's "Democratization, Conflict Prevention, and Arab Political Reform: A Policy-Scholarship Nexus?" and Sabrina Sunderraj's "Promoting People-Centered Democracy: A Conflict Prevention Strategy". In his article, Kiamie considers the relationship between democratization and conflict prevention in the Arab World through an analysis of two phenomena: the persistence of authoritarianism and the role of Islamist movements in the political sphere. It concludes that policymakers are not doing enough to fully understand the origins, intentions, and proven actions of non-violent Islamist organizations; that the global War on Terror has provided a convenient cover for regional authoritarian figures to retard internal reform and opposition; and, that many analysts continue to use Cold War lenses in "understanding" conflict and political movements in the Arab World. On the other hand, Sabrina Sunderraj's article enunciates on promoting democracy from a people-centered grassroots perspective, she further suggests initiating studies on the quality of social capital in the region and in encouraging civil society to develop linkages with civil society models in South and South East Asia. And concludes with the hope that the region will own the democratic process and strengthen its course to a meaningful democracy.

Meanwhile, Neven Bondokji's article titled "Civil Society, Governments, and the UN: Partners in Conflict Prevention" sheds light on a major initiative currently discussed in the premises of the UN which is the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) that aims at introducing and supporting a shift from reaction to prevention through the adoption of a global policy agenda based on the Global Action Agenda that helps setting up sustainable networks of Civil Society Organizations, national and regional institutions with commitment to conflict prevention. ■

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CIVIL SOCIETY, GOVERNMENTS, AND THE UN: PARTNERS IN CONFLICT PREVENTION

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“The Prevention of Armed Conflict” a report from the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s June 2001 set the momentum for the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict. Specifically, recommendation 27 “urge[s] NGOs with an interest in conflict prevention to organize an international conference of local, national, and international NGOs on their role in conflict prevention and future interaction with the United Nations in this field.”

In response to this call, the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) was initiated in 2002 involving fifteen regions of the world. With the larger aim of introducing and supporting a shift from reaction to prevention, the GPPAC attempts to achieve this through three goals: 1) creating sustainable networks of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), UN, governments, and national and regional institutions with commitment to conflict prevention, 2) adopting a global policy agenda based on the Global Action Agenda developed in this global process, and 3) raising public awareness about the crucial role of civil society in conflict prevention and introducing human security as an alternative to militarism.⁽¹⁾

The dynamics of this global process involve parallel regional processes where networks of CSOs are established along with a number of meetings to discuss issues of concern to CSOs working in fields of conflict prevention and human security. Led by a regional initiator, each regional process has resulted in a regional action agenda that reflects particularities of that region. These action agendas aim at empowering CSOs in conflict prevention within a co-operational frame with the UN and their respective governments. Regional action agendas⁽²⁾ will be incorporated into the Global Action Agenda (GAA) to be presented at the international conference “From Action to Prevention: Civil Society Forging Partnerships to Prevent Violent Conflict and Build Peace” in July 2005. During the conference, working groups would be formed to decide on future mechanisms to implement the GAA.

The Global Action Agenda (GAA) -which is in the final drafting stage⁽³⁾- will stipulate recommendations to achieve the aforementioned goals. Building on the Carnegie Commission definition of conflict prevention, the GAA divided recommendation into areas of structural and operational prevention⁽⁴⁾. Under structural prevention, the GAA will recommend further promotion of human rights, CSO cooperation in practical disarmament, and

enhancing the role of education and media in fostering a “culture of peace.” Recommendations on operational prevention will include the establishment of early warning and early response systems, strengthening dialogue and preventive diplomacy, and supporting community-based conflict management techniques. In addition, the GAA specifies recommendations to foster cooperation between CSOs, governments, the UN, and regional organizations. Strengthening the larger civil society attains special attention in recommendations with reference to women, youth, and faith-based organizations.

The GAA is significant because for the first time CSOs are recognized as major actors in fields that have been traditionally restricted to governments and security apparatuses. The GAA will directly urge governments and the UN to recognize CSOs’ role in the security sector and will emphasize the partnership nature necessary for any sustainable conflict prevention strategy. A major advantage of the GAA is that it completes the circle of upstream and grassroots knowledge in conflict prevention. CSOs’ expertise in grassroots dynamics can smooth conflict prevention efforts at local levels. Governments and the UN, on the other hand, have the technical experience in peace keeping and peace building on national and international levels.

The GPPAC holds potential for sustainability. This stems from the fact that a strong sense of ownership has accompanied the GPPAC since its birth. CSOs have drafted regional action agendas, actively engaged in regional processes, and are currently reviewing the draft GAA. This sense of ownership of a global document that strengthens solidarity between CSOs from diverse regions can motivate the larger CSO community to engage effectively to join this global spectrum in future.

The Middle East has its share in this global process. “The Arab Partnership for Conflict Prevention and

(1) See www.gppac.net

(2) These action agendas are currently being finalized. Draft action agendas have been available to RCCP since it is a steering group member for the Middle East regional network “The Arab Partnership for Conflict Prevention and Human Security (APCPHS)”

(3) The first draft of the Global Action Agenda has been circulated to CSOs for feedback and endorsement. This draft is available on http://www.gppac.org/documents/GPPAC/Global_Action_Agenda/Global_Action_Agenda_draft1.pdf

(4) The Carnegie Commission defines structural prevention as addressing the underlying economic, social, and political causes of conflicts by meeting human needs and through effective governance. Operational prevention refers to peace making efforts that respond to escalation and violence. For more details, see Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict. *Preventing Deadly Conflict: Final Report with Executive Summary*. New York: Carnegie Commission, 1997; available at www.wilsoncenter.org/subsites/ccpd/index.htm

Human Security” was established under the umbrella of the GPPAC. Seventeen CSOs⁽⁵⁾ have been drafting the Middle East Action Agenda that addresses structural and operational constraints within the social and political context of the region.

The GPPAC, and particularly the APCPHS, is highly significant for CSOs in the Middle East where their role has been weak due to poor understanding of civil society role in fostering change at all levels. Government restrictions remain a major obstacle too. The 2004 Arab Human Development Report recognized this problem stating, “Present-day civil society has its own flaws, brought on by a climate of corruption and restricted freedom.”⁽⁶⁾

Although the Arab Human Development Report 2004 discusses reform challenges in the Middle East, important insights can be drawn about the role of civil society in conflict prevention. Reform will entail larger freedom for CSOs to work in a better informed and a more influential environment. One can add that transitional tensions are expected because of the new economic and social pressures imposed by reform moves. CSOs will work hand in hand with governments to prevent any escalation that may threaten reform efforts. With increased freedom levels, CSOs can also utilize local expertise to mobilize support on ground level for conflict prevention strategies adopted by governments. The AHDR goes further to add that the “historical metamorphosis” toward reform and freedom in the Arab world would be marked by dialogue between social forces and governments, and the establishment of pan-Arab networks⁽⁷⁾.

It is in this regard that the GPPAC introduces this shift toward the “historical metamorphosis.” The GPPAC had set the momentum for establishing a regional network of CSOs that strengthens solidarity to face regional pressures. When it comes to definitions, the GPPAC also introduces a new understanding of CSOs. In the current context of the Middle East, the term civil society has been used to “label groups contrasted to the state, regardless of purpose or character.”⁽⁸⁾ It can be highlighted here that the APCPHS’s effort at setting a partnership frame for CSOs relations with governments initiates a radical turning point in the understanding of the very nature of CSOs’ work. Other initiatives in the region have already started introducing such a change in perspective⁽⁹⁾. While these initiatives try to empower CSOs, the GPPAC brings conflict prevention into focus in a larger dimension of partnerships on a global level with the UN. ■

(5) At this stage the APCPHS is an interim network. Membership will be opened for other CSOs in future.

(6) UNDP and Regional Bureau for Arab States, Arab Human Development Report 2004: Towards Freedom in the Arab World. New York, UNDP: 2004. p. 177

(7) *ibid.*

(8) Ali Abootalibi. “Civil Society, Democracy, and the Middle East” Middle East Review of International Affairs. Vo. 2 No 3, Sep. 1998. <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/1998/issue3/jv2n3a8.html>

(9) For example, the Bibliotheca Alexandria conference on ‘Critical Reforms in the Arab World: from Rhetoric to Reality’ in March 2004 brought together members of the civil society in the Arab region. The conference resulted in an agenda for reform as well as a follow-up mechanism to establish a track record for similar symposia.



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DEMOCRATIZATION, CONFLICT PREVENTION, AND ARAB POLITICAL REFORM: A POLICY-SCHOLARSHIP NEXUS?

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Few doubt that Washington's language regarding Arab reform and democratization has changed significantly in the post-September 11 environment, particularly since President Bush's November 2003 speech at the National Endowment for Democracy. What seems troubling, however, is a widening policy-rhetoric gap and little tangible evidence of political and security reform in the Arab world as a result of this rhetoric. This essay considers the relationship between democratization and conflict prevention in the Arab World through an analysis of two phenomena of which Washington seems intrigued: the persistence and durability of authoritarianism and the role of Islamist movements in the political sphere. It concludes that policymakers are not doing enough to fully understand the origins, intentions, and proven actions of non-violent Islamist organizations; that the global War on Terror has provided a convenient cover for regional authoritarian figures to retard internal reform and opposition; and, that many analysts continue to use Cold War lenses in "understanding" conflict and political movements in the Arab World. This study rejects crude cultural arguments and instead relies on case-specific evidence and selected American scholarship.

Part I - Authoritarianism and the Challenge to Change

Analysis of the "robustness" of authoritarian regimes (to borrow Eva Bellin's description) in the Arab world contributes fruitfully to comparative politics theory through a number of different channels. The danger inherent in treating authoritarianism as the flip-side of the democratic coin is treating the features of such regimes as antithetical to those in democracies. In fact, a more constructive way to study Arab authoritarianism is to understand what sustains these regimes and how they have managed - following the Cold War and September 11 - to remain in power.

A solid springboard for discussion would be a focus on the ways authoritarian regimes in the region have managed their populations; such regimes, like democracies, require the use of segments of the population ("vested interests") to maintain state and societal connections. In many cases, such as Algeria, Egypt, and Syria, grips on power have been maintained through the careful construction of corporatism. This arrangement provides for a controlled, limited number of interest groups in civil society that "represent" the interests of broader bases of support. The membership of these organizations in turn lend support to the regime (and often benefit from exclusive contracts,

privileged access to state resources, and, in many cases, state funding for their organizations. This, of course, raises questions about the relationship between civil society and the state in terms of democratization: if organizations are not financially autonomous but instead rely on the state, their indirect political effects on the political process are likely to be muted.

Many states, such as Tunisia have experimented with opening the public sphere and expanding the realm in which interests have an opportunity to meet and compete. And although in Tunisia this public space is quite tight and actors constricted, it is still worth studying the ways in which that country's economic success have not produced a democratic miracle, as some had hoped, but instead retreated into a form of neo-clientelism - or, a retraditionalization of political life. The idea of liberalization versus democratization is well-grounded theoretically and in terms of case studies in Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany, and Paul Noble's volumes, *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World*, a section of which by Daniel Brumberg demonstrates the ways in which authoritarian regimes only allow an opening of political and public spheres when regime-suicide is preventable.

Aside from very expensive forms of clientelism (in which, unlike corporatism, the state forms relationship not with groups but with individual elites, who return the favor of primacy with pledges of support to the state from their bases), other states, particularly in the Gulf, have developed neopatrimonial patterns. This authoritarian regime type involves the binding of a particular person, clan, family, or symbol with a system of law and order. Authoritarian regimes have been known, too, to manufacture external crises to mask flawed domestic policies - or outright state failures. Saddam's Iraq did this famously in its wars against Iran and Kuwait. At home, coercive state-security apparatuses ensure dissent is managed and opposition kept in-check, a point which has been addresses thoroughly by F. Gregory Gause III and Lisa Wedeen, among others.

Dependency theorists and pure Marxists are eager to attribute the durability of authoritarianism to qualities of the international state system that have, for some time, witnessed superpower support for dictatorships, as opposed to encouraging democracy and pluralists within. The context of the Cold War explains how policies supporting authoritarian regimes over Communist states produced the "blind eye" effect whereby the United States and others stood by their "moderate" regional allies: Morocco, in its colonization of Western Sahara and Tunisia, in its "battle" against Islamists and those who sought to "import" systemic features from neighbors Libya and Algeria, for example.

In the Middle East, we can look to the production of oil and other natural resources, on the one hand, and the processing of strategic rents (international aid, passage rights in the Suez canal) on the other. (Kiren Chaudhry's *Price of Wealth* is a valuable contribution to the discipline.) Absent in the rentier state is the necessary social-contract component of state-society relations. For example, regimes in the Gulf have developed, post independence, capable distributive capacities and elaborate welfare programs but have been less successful in the development of extractive abilities (what Nazih Ayubi labels, region-wide, as a lack of hegemony in his *Over-stating the Arab State* - or what Michael Hudson, in *Arab Politics*, prefers to call the "crisis of legitimacy"). Because they do not rely on their populations for general socio-economic support, rentier states do not face intense impetuses for reform and liberalization of the public sphere. So long as regime ends facilitated the free-flow of the fuel driving advanced economies' growth, these regimes' tools were - at most - privately criticized.

Part II - The Origins and Appeal of Islamist Movements

As if the above explanations for persistence of authoritarianism themselves were not enough to challenge Washington's policymakers, analysts must also deal with the reality of powerful and popular Islamist opposition to these regimes. Why is it that Islamism serves as the primary vehicle for many prominent opposition and reform movements in the Arab world today, rather than the more traditional "usual suspects," such as class-based movements? There are a number of explanations that could possibly explain the rise, development, and maturation of Islamist movements as the means of choice for political change in the Arab world. In terms of the failure of secular regimes, some scholars argue that the colonial legacy of the region has had a major impact on the ways in which institutions have taken root and political cultures have been shaped. The process by which colonial, imperial powers carved artificial states and statelets out of the former lands of the Ottoman Empire during and in the aftermath of World War I produced a region of artificial political borders and vested interests installed with the intention of allowing former superpowers to maintain implicit control (see Charles Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, Michael Hudson, *Middle East Dilemma*, and Beverly Milton-Edwards, *Contemporary Politics in the Middle East*).

The corporatism, neopatrimonialism, and other forms of limited interest representation and patronage left by colonizers and exploited by local elites did little to instill confidence among the masses in these political systems. Corruption, rent-seeking behavior, and a general aura of "wasta" (connections) filled both the political and public spheres to the extent that regimes were running themselves into the ground financially and ever-steadily decreasing what little legitimacy they held in the eyes

of their populations. The persistence of certain types of traditional political-economic arrangements, such as feudalism, prevented the development of a distinguishable middle class, seen by many as paramount in challenging the dominant political order. Particularly after World War II, Arab states, now heavily bureaucratized and "fierce," to borrow Nazih Ayubi's categorization in *Over-stating the Arab State*, used coercive apparatuses to drive leftists, Communists, and others underground, eventually crushing their movements.

In the post-World War II period of competing modernization, institution-building, and dependency theories of development, many regimes that desired to engage in state-building exercises did so at a great expense. The costs associated with building national infrastructure, curricula, and institutions that would set a pace for the socio-political and, particularly, economic futures of the region's states were tremendous. But in many cases, regime apparatuses were the only organs in the state capable of paying for such programs - hence the accumulation of debt from national-pride boosting import-substituting industrialization plans in places like Algeria and Egypt. Later, dissatisfaction and disillusionment followed from defeat in the Arab-Israeli 1967 war. Islamists leapt to the forefront and sent populist-inspired verbal blows to regimes that failed to protect national, Arab, Islamic, and other interests.

It is also critical to consider the increasing geostrategic importance of the Persian Gulf. Once the project of the British, Gulf security had become a significant element in American-Soviet competition during the Cold War. Securing the flow of natural resources to the industrialized world at any price became a priority for superpowers. Political developments across the water, including the dramatic Iranian Islamic Revolution, provided convenient excuses for regional regimes to restructure and "protect" the public sphere in the name of preventing the importation of "foreign" revolutionary ideals.

Finally, unlike imported notions of Marxism, Communism, and other ideologies, the local language of Islam proved a source inspiration with languages, symbols, and discourses that have been popularly understood and relatable. Rather than having to translate such difficult phrases as "mode of production," Islamists are able to capitalize on those Islamic concepts, precepts, teachings, allegories, and texts that Muslims have related to (albeit with changes in interpretation) from their youth. Somewhat related to this explanation is the Orientalist interpretation that there is nothing to explain: Islam is politics, politics is Islam. Because of the pervasive nature of Islam as a collective religion (a similar argument to one Howard Wiarda has used regarding Catholicism and Latin American corporatism), Muslims can rely on Islamists and religious institutions to fulfill gaps where the state is impotent in delivering services or providing protection, so the argument goes.

Scholars have tried in earnest to understand the relationship between Islamists and reform and conflict prevention. Alan Richards and John Waterbury's "Is Islam the Solution?" (in their *Political Economy of the Middle East*) suggests that Islamist groups desire only the imposition of a particularly conservative brand of Islamic law from above, are hostile to minority and human rights, and define themselves as anti-modern, anti-Western, and anti-democratic. Despite their fears, they seem to reach the conclusion, perhaps uncomfortably, that Islamic finance and the welfare dimension and distributive features advocated by different movements would probably not result in any worse conditions for states and their citizens in the short-run. That said, it seems unrealistic to continue to promote policies of excluding Islamists from political life, lest more bloody Algerias be a frightening reality for the region.

Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori's *Muslim Politics*, on the other hand, is a healthy counter-weight to the particular stance on "the" Islamist agenda adopted by Richards and Waterbury. Rather than taking the goal of Islamists as the forced implementation of *shari'a*, these authors seek to look broadly at the Islamic world for ways in which politics plays out in varied national and regional environment. Their findings suggest, for example, a richly diverse world with respect to civil, political, and media rights, as well as the role of women. They consider how today's elites and opposition voices use the language of Islam to market their politics. These points are often lost in the transition from academic analysis to Washington's policy formation.

Mustapha Kamel Al-Sayyid's "The Other Face of the Islamist Movement" is an attack on the essentialism that has reduced all Islamist organizations to bin Laden-notoriety. The author seems disgruntled with the tendency of foreign policy crafters to associate non-violent Islamist political groups with the world's violent Islamist extremists and treat them all with the same caution. Doing so blurs the lines of distinction among traditional, moderate, and radical Islamists - and those who use violence and those who denounce it. Rather than being excluded, exiled, or executed (for Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt, for instance), had militant Islamists taken control in these states, would authoritarianism have been replaced by more ideologically-driven and rigid states - or a series of Iranian-styled pragmatic-theocratic institutional dances? This kind of healthy counterfactual debate is critical if Washington is to engage in a broader dialogue with Islamist oppositions.

Conclusion

Regardless of how connected America's military involvement in Iraq and the region is to political landscape "changes" in places like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Libya, the Palestinian Territories, and Lebanon (I believe they are not - just as "changes" may not necessarily

result in "change"), a blend of optimism and realism would be in order, were major powers like the United States, to bring policies in line with rhetorical pledges and not allow the use of War on Terror language to be exploited by regional autocrats in the name of regime survival. Many American policymakers, in particular, are resistant to the idea that Cold War attitudes toward authoritarianism did not, in the long run, bring security to the United States. Likewise, they are hesitant to embrace the sizable populations of the region attracted, for many and often diverse reasons, to Islamist movements. This, too, in the long run will not serve American interests but only further alienate reformists and silent majorities alike.

In our attempts to "see the forest through the trees" (by developing a picture of the region's authoritarian and Islamist movements beyond individual cases), we are better poised to understand why great changes are not likely to happen soon - why, unfortunately, democrats and pluralists in the region face an uphill battle for inclusion and increased power. This does not mean that possibilities for change are non-existent; on the contrary, there are a number of concrete strategies the United States can adopt to close the rhetoric-policy gap: (1) being more even-handed in its treatment of the Arab-Israeli conflict and developing public diplomacy programs that address this issue - the core of regional anti-Americanism - with seriousness, (2) promoting the study of the American democratic experience versus using Messianic language to describe the "mission" in bringing "freedom" to the Arab World, and (3) re-evaluating its relationship with regimes which are less-than-committed to political pluralism and civil and human rights. Not only would a pre-emptive attack on these fronts bring America more security, but indications that the United States is serious about democratization may encourage the region's majorities to reshape their impressions of the world's lone superpower as a meddling or hypocritical obstacle to change. This duopoly of changes in reality and perception could potentially be a starting point for new Arab-American security, economic, and political relationships to the benefit of far more people than are served by today's power structures. ■

PROMOTING PEOPLE-CENTERED DEMOCRACY: A CONFLICT PREVENTION STRATEGY

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“There is a storm in the air, it is perceptive yet it is nowhere.”

(From “Random Perspectives of a Globetrotter”)

The present atmosphere in the region is one of anticipation interspersed with apprehension and hope. A plethora of actors supported by global powers⁽¹⁾ are in the business of promoting democracy and reforms in the region. Strategic interests, vested priorities and genuine concerns mix to render the promotion of democracy both a dubious exercise as well as a much needed pressure upon existing regimes in the region.

International and regional organizations have identified democracy as a means to reducing and preventing conflict, consequentially sustaining peace in the region. With the end of the Cold War, it was hoped that conflicts would subside and that this was a victory for democracy, more specifically liberal democracy, and that it would finally bring freedom and economic success to all. Once again, however, aggressive reprisals anchored in past histories of ethnic identities, enforced ideologies and maps that made countries seem like a premeditated chessboard, threw up its ugly face. The lack of legitimacy of existing governments (which I recognize as not having the clear and justly secured mandate of “by the people, of the people and for the people”), ineffective governance, inadequate institutional structures that could support the process of initiating and sustaining a meaningful democracy and lack of an organized and independent civil society are among the root causes for the intermittent to constant eruptions of violence in the MENA region.

This article will look at the latter aspect - an organized and independent civil society - as one of the key links to the democratization process as well as the arms that are embedded in the grassroots - the very foundation for democracy to take root and function meaningfully in the countries of the MENA region. In making suggestions the article makes a case for initiating research in the quality of social capital in the region on a systematic basis and also requests the region to look at and to participate in successful examples of functioning civil society entities in South and South East Asia, which share similar, if not synonymous, values and cultural underpinnings with the region.

Section I

A cursory glance through the various democracy promotion projects emanating from the boardrooms of global actors

sometimes in collaboration with local elites lays bare the nebulous nature of this process and lacunae in the knowledge of the citizens of the region. Most projects are based on assumptions that reveal biased comprehensions; this can prove, in the long run to be more harmful than productive and not in the interest of promoting conflict prevention strategies.

It is clear that global actors, in this context the EU and the US, have their strategic interests at the core of their agenda in the region. For the EU, among other reasons, it is having a secure and stable neighbourhood as it reflects on the levels of immigration into their borders and how they deal with these neighbours is also reflected in the internal election outcomes⁽²⁾. The common concern that the EU shares with the US is countering terrorism that is believed to be a result of ‘failed states’, WMD proliferation and maintaining stable oil prices. In addition, for the US, important interests include: “...ensuring stability of friendly regimes, ensuring Israel’s security, and promoting democracy and human rights”⁽³⁾. When the US invaded Iraq, the banner of democracy was not its first priority⁽⁴⁾ but establishing a military presence in a strategic area in the Middle East, and by doing so the US is effectively conveying the message “contain terrorism and stabilize or else”. Combining a military stance with public concern, the US is now one of the most vigorous promoters of democracy in the region. Democracy situated in this range of interests seems a rather misleading misnomer and puts forward questions of how democratic is the promotion of democracy by global actors in this region.

Yet, because the methodology is still nebulous and the process is still in the rhetorical stage, the MENA can take the opportunity to own the process and develop a stronger and focused agenda. It must also take the advantage of the present veering of global actors from targeting the regimes and their elite coterie to civil society⁽⁵⁾. Prior to 9/11, incumbent regimes were constantly but not forcefully pressured to democratize as a condition to economic

(1) Here I identify them as the US and the EU - the main actors involved in the region.

(2) It is interesting to note that it is argued that the No-Vote was a consequence of the people’s alienation from the process, and the analyst point to a democratic deficit in the laying out of the European Constitution.

(3) Ben Saleh, Nora and Byman, Daniel L, eds., “The Future Security Environment in the Middle East: Conflict, Stability and Political Change” (RAND: Project Air Force, 2004) RAND Corporation.

(4) Freedom and democracy were certainly not the initial aims for invading Iraq, ostensibly it was a preemptive strike against WMD proliferation and the war against terrorism. It is therefore disturbing to note that recent writings in the media have lost the focus on the initial aim. The US held the banner of democracy only when it was unable to control the ‘insurgency’.

(5) See the Greater Middle East Partnership Initiative, WTO, EMP, and EuroMeSCo among others to note the importance that Civil society has garnered in the promotion of democracy.

aid. To appease or at least appear to be following the conditions situated the regimes in a position to open some doors for civil society to act in this citizen building exercise. Notwithstanding the restraints and shortcomings in the laws, the people of the region took the chance to try and organize, thus indicating that there is a sizable level of awareness and urge on the part of citizens to come together to serve common causes and give informed representation to the voice of the public -in short, to democratize.

However, we still lack in-depth knowledge and well-researched documents and writings on grassroots comprehensions, social networks of trust and solidarity, and levels of trust and involvement in societal processes. These are some of the essential foundational information needed to promoting democracy effectively. The process for any project in the region has often been top-down and there is much information on the Arab elites, but little that is genuinely representative of the people. Arab elites are also among the core producers of knowledge in the region, whilst some of them are honest and sincere representatives of the public, others are far removed from ground realities and could easily fall into the category of spin-doctors to suit their own vested interests and goals.

Section II

To enter the area of understanding the public at grassroots as well as strengthening civil society, we could suggest, encouraging ethnographic studies involving contemporary and innovative methodologies, opening the space for and developing subaltern voices and, what maybe more appealing to economists and those involved in the promotion of democracy, to initiate studies on social capital in the region. This latter suggestion could either be done at a micro level or at a macro level. We could also expect that such a study would divulge the ground realities of the effects of occupation on a population and what mechanisms people develop to help each other under such circumstances. How trust is eroded and developed impacts a country's ability to function as a whole.

According to Robert Putnam, one of the guru's on social capital, "social capital refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefits."⁽⁶⁾ Within the scope of this definition social capital includes a wide variety of benefits that flow from trust, reciprocity and cooperation, thereby creating value for people's civic engagement. In researching social capital, it is possible to produce quantifiable data on levels of social cohesion and inclusions, social responsibility and initiative, voluntarism and civic engagement, participation and exclusion, and trust and solidarity. Quantification elements and criterions could be developed depending on context and regional specifications. The outputs would give us the basis upon which to develop ownership of the democratic process by making the study public and involving the citizens to participate and thereby give voice

in formal and in informal avenues to affect change at both micro and macro arenas. Such an exercise would provide insights into strengths and weaknesses and help us locate and situate the problems and dilemmas involved in the promotion of democracy in the region. Importantly, we will be able to design an informed strategy of promotion rather than a presumed strategy, which is the present scenario.

Section III

Understanding and contextualizing the existing social capital in the region would give us the opportunity to define and improve the quality of civil society. Civil society is commonly understood to be those groups - formal and informal - that act independently of the state and in the interest of the public. However, in the region, the qualitative and operational aspects of civil society is considered to be weak and is hardly regarded as a serious pressure valve that can hold the state accountable for excesses or be informative of ground realities. It is also noted that civil society organizations are often linked to the royal families of the region or to tribal factions (narrowing the scope of operations and participation of a cross section of people) and with interventions from the security and state apparatuses (a common occurrence) it is difficult for smaller organizations to be included in the larger scheme.⁽⁷⁾ This does not however, discount the fact that civil society is not interested or that there is no urge for the people of the region to be involved.

What we lack is in developing those civil society elements that are closer to ground realities, who tend to work on the periphery with low budgets, but whose output quality, knowledge base and experience far exceed those endowed with big budgets, which often tend to be flimsy in content and quality. We must encourage those on the periphery as well as those with big budgets, and position them in such a way so as to be productive, accountable and engaged. We also lack a truly people-centered participative process, which is a key to developing an operative democracy that is able to be as inclusive as possible of people's aspirations and choices in the decision-making process of the state. Furthermore, civil society organizations, whilst composed of well meaning members, seriously lack capabilities and models upon which they can develop and produce effective interventions and results. In such a scenario, one of the solutions would be to link up with successful civil society endeavors in societies and countries that share similar histories, cultures and values. South Asia and South East Asia are the regions that come closest to providing achievable and successful models of civil society's involvement in operationalizing the democratic process in their respective regions.

South Asia and South East Asia share the colonial

(6) Putnam, Robert, *Bowling Alone: the collapse and revival of American Community*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.

(7) For detailed analysis see Khouri, Riad al, *Civil Society and its Role in the Process of Lawmaking in Jordan*, August 2004.

experience with the MENA region, their lands were also quartered, although perhaps not as disturbingly as the Palestinian lands were. The Asian region also share similar values and some cultural structures that have different appellations but similar functions; they share religions such as Islam, Christianity and Judaism that have their basis in historical ties. Some countries of South Asian and South East Asian regions have overcome autocratic systems of governance and are in different stages of democratic transition; they have all experienced structural adjustment and are trying to integrate into the global economic process. What they may not share with the MENA region is a constant interference from external actors for oil resources and geographical proximity to the recognized global powers. However, strategically they are close to Central Asia the next field of involvement in the competition for securing oil resources.

Having been intensely involved in the South Asian region at a field level and subsequently being an advocate of and participant in civil society involvement in policy making - it will not be a misplaced suggestion to the MENA region to seriously consider engaging in understanding and learning from the democratic processes of South Asian and South East Asian regions. The region has its pitfalls but civil society organizations have over the years acquired the taste for voicing their concerns, unhesitatingly calling for transparency and accountancy and the ability to obtain mechanisms that allow it be decision-makers in some areas of the state system of governance.

Voices in the MENA region articulate their fears of democracy being “imposed” by the campaigning global actors and that such an imposition is insensitive to the values and cultures of the region and devoid of pragmatic understanding of the subtle and apparent differentials between regions. They warn against blanket models of democracy being installed in the region and a democracy wherein elections are a farce and institutions non-functional. With this in view, it would not be a wasted exercise to link civil society members of the MENA region to those in the South Asian and South East Asian regions. It could be done through the support of global actors or through civil society members of the MENA who are sincerely committed to bringing about just and sustainable democratic changes to their region. They would be able to train and equip themselves with the knowledge and process of developing methodologies in building genuine democracies from the experiences of the South and South East Asians. This would not even be an expensive process, and for the global actors who are seriously interested in viable results, this is a cost effective and value added intervention.

Such an effort would give MENA actors the ownership to locate their own niche in democratizing their countries, because they would be exposed to a very lively, experienced and stimulating civil society in the South and South East Asian regions. To give a few examples, one of

the most illustrious being the Grameen Bank project of Bangladesh initiated by Mr. Mohammed Yunus recognized world over, including in Jordan, as one of the most effective methods of empowering the poor, empowerment of women (especially women headed households) and developing an informed voice in policy making. This project placed the responsibility upon the educated members of the community, leaders and village councils to achieve the reduction of poverty. The Grameen project has progressed to other regions and has developed other methodologies that fit into various contexts. Bangladesh has experienced democracy, autocratic military rule and once again a democracy that is yet to stabilize, this does not however deter civil society. Another country would be Pakistan, which has been in and out of democratic governance and military dictatorship, yet possesses a lively civil society that refuses to disappear despite severe constraints. Pakistan’s civil society is part of the TrackII diplomatic efforts that involves India and Bangladesh in promoting sustainable peace in the region. India is often quoted as a model democracy, franchise in this country is the great leveler - all members of this huge population regardless of monetary or social status are equalized in their choice to choose who should represent them.

In South East Asia, Indonesia and Malaysia “*gotong royong*” is a concept that spurs members of a community to do things together, help each other, settle disputes, act as witnesses in ceremonies, provide support to weaker members, and be jointly responsible for the community in the spirit of goodwill. The governments of this region encourage these local groupings that have roots in traditional customs and have since become inclusive of contemporary challenges but still maintain the spirit of voluntarism. This system is entirely dependent on the community.

These are brief examples that give us an idea of what are the potentials and possibilities. We could seriously engage in seeking linkages - and this is not a difficult exercise as South and South East Asian regions have visible, organized and functioning civil society entities that are generally open to sharing experiences, internships and can offer training activities.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate that promoting democracy in the region should not be an apex exercise and must involve citizens of the region from the base. Keeping in mind the strategic interests and resource abilities of global actors, I would still venture to state that the MENA countries can “own” the democratization process - it only needs commitment, an unswerving drive and creativity in the ability to think of the best methods and alternatives that would indeed open the most closed systems to much needed freedom, democracy, security, peace and well-being of the people of this region.

“An enslaved mind is worse than physical internment.”
(From “*Random Perspectives of a Globetrotter*”) ■