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Introduction

During the so-called ‘Baghdad Spring’ of early 2005 the Arab Middle East appeared to witness the regional reformist upheaval that neoconservative proponents of the decision to topple Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003 had prognosticated (Kagan/Kristol 2002; Muravchik 2002). Given the enduring ability of authoritarian Arab regimes to fend off domestic and (cautious) external pressure for political reform, this article moves beyond the assessment and critique of the Bush administration’s (mis-)application of the ‘democratic peace’ thesis with regard to the Iraq war (Ish-Shalom 2007/08; Pickering/Pecency 2006; Russett 2005). Shifting the emphasis from the domestic aspects of democratization and the democratization agendas and strategies of external actors like the United States and the European Union, it aims to demonstrate the insufficiencies of external democratization efforts that rely on a crude reading of the ‘modernization’ school of thinking and ignore not only the insights of the ‘transition’ school about the international dimensions of democratization but also the increasing body of literature dealing with causes of authoritarian resilience in the Arab world.¹ With case studies of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, two countries sharing close strategic relationships with the United States, yet differing in the socioeconomic foundations of authoritarianism and experiences with managing external and domestic calls for political reform, it aims to contribute to the wider academic debate on the international dimension of authoritarian resilience.²

After an initial interrogation of the problems associated with Washington’s emphasis on the modernization approach, this article will synthesize insights of the transition school’s understanding of democratization as well as recent work on the resilience of authoritarianism in the Middle East to highlight the failure to make credible use of positive and negative conditionality as the ‘missing link’ in explaining the Arab world’s democratic exception.

Taking the Long Term View - The Modernization School as a Rationale for a 'Hands-off' Approach to Democratisation

After the events of 11 September 2001, leading U.S. diplomats admitted that decades-old policies which had subordinated the goal of expanding the 'third wave' of democratization to the Middle East to safeguarding other perceived national interests (Anderson 2001; Berger 2009) were partly to blame for sustaining the region's 'democratic exception' (Haass 2002). When Secretary of State Colin Powell unveiled the so-called Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) at the conservative Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC as the main vehicle to address these shortcomings, he bemoaned the 'condescending notion' that 'freedom could not grow' in the Middle East. Declaring that '(a)ny approach to the Middle East that ignores its political, economic, and educational underdevelopment will be built on sand' (Powell 2002), he made clear that the state department-led efforts on political reform in the Arab world would be informed by the analysis of the modernization school. First propagated by Seymour Martin Lipset, this approach emphasises the structural preconditions for democracy and quantifiable indices, such as wealth measured in per capita income, industrialization, urbanization and education (Lipset 1993). In his classic assessment of the preconditions for Middle Eastern democracy Charles Issawi therefore deemed nothing less than 'a great economic and social transformation which will strengthen society and make it capable of bearing the weight of the modern State' to be 'a necessary, if not a sufficient, condition for the establishment of genuine democracy' (1956, p. 41). Obviously, such grandiose prescriptions can easily justify external support for authoritarian regimes on the grounds that the relevant country has demonstrated 'insufficient' socioeconomic development (Grugel 1999). At least, they explain why those interested in whether or

not the United States can actually promote democracy deemed the modernization literature ‘curiously unsatisfying’ (Allison/Beschel 1992, p. 85).³

The decision to put MEPI’s management under the leadership of Deputy-Assistant Secretary of State, Liz Cheney, daughter of then-Vice President Dick Cheney, and into the hands of the state department’s Near East bureau meant that, initially, 70 percent of all grants went directly to Arab governments and only 17.5 percent to representatives of Arab civil society (Carothers 2005; Wittes 2004b).⁴ The tendency of MEPI officers to seek approval for their projects from respective Arab governments further limited the programme’s effectiveness in promoting genuine political reform (Wittes/Yerkes 2006): ‘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 (Alterman 2004).’

With MEPI quickly becoming a vehicle for the ‘authoritarian upgrading’ of Arab regimes (Heydemann 2007), the promise of a free trade zone with the region (Wayne 2003) and privileged bilateral trade agreements or WTO membership for ‘peaceful’ countries (Zoellick 2003) constituted another pillar of the Bush administration’s attempts to apply the modernization school’s concepts. It followed the hypothesis - attractive to policy-makers looking for a loftier framing of the parochial interest in the spread of free market economies - that Capitalism contributes to democratization by requiring the rule of law to function properly (Deudney/Ikenberry 2009) as well as by creating demands for political participation from a skilled workforce used to independent thinking and articulation (Inglehart/Welzel 2009).

As a comparatively rich country with a per capita GDP of roughly US\$20,000 in 2008 Saudi Arabia challenges the conventional wisdom which posits a direct link between economic wealth and democracy. In fact, if one accepts that ‘post-materialist liberty aspirations’ increase the likelihood of authoritarian failure (Welzel/Inglehart 2005) then the

largest of the oil rich countries of the Arab peninsula would be a prime candidate.⁵ Yet, in Saudi Arabia supposedly reform-conducive social orientations contrast with a political reality where resource-based external rents and the associated 'segmented clientelism' (Hertog 2005) have prevented the emergence of a politically engaged bourgeoisie. Together with Vietnam, Saudi Arabia was the only country out of 72 covered in the 2000 wave of the World Values Survey which had achieved a score indicating slight emphasis on 'self-expression values' vis-à-vis 'survival values' without achieving at least partly free status in the 2009 Freedom House Index (World Values Survey 2009; Freedom House 2009).⁶

Saudi Arabia's rankings are not surprising to those who see economic growth as a precondition not for the establishment, but for the political stability of a democracy (Dorenspleet 2004; Pevehouse 2002; Przeworski/Limongi 1997).⁷ In light of the postulate that integration into the global economy increases potentially reform-inducing linkages and decreases an authoritarian regime's ability to curtail them (Way/Levitsky 2006; Levitsky/Way 2005), a free trade approach might expand the still limited Western leverage over Saudi Arabia. In fact, reflecting a broader change in business culture in the Arab Gulf region which some regard as a possible step toward greater political transparency (Ehteshami/Wright 2007) representatives of the country's business elite have already moved closer into the current centre of decision-making and even felt emboldened to push for a modernization of the curriculum and (Glosemeyer 2004, 143-6). Yet, sceptics warned that while the promise of World Trade Organization membership provided King Abdullah with political cover for his attempts to cautiously tackle the widespread corruption within the extended royal family,⁸ such developments might only lead to a 'highly truncated version of the rule of law' aimed at enhancing a regime's domestic position (Carothers 2007, pp. 15-6).⁹

The observation that the link between economic growth and democratic transitions is stronger in poorer countries (Brinks/Coppedge 2006; Przeworski/Limongi 1997) would appear to make Egypt an easier candidate to apply the insights of the modernization school. In reality, however, U.S.-Egyptian relations constitute in many ways a particularly striking example of how the modernization school can provide a rationale for government-friendly mechanisms that end up supporting an (increasingly) authoritarian status quo.

In a pre-9/11 example typical of the Clinton administration's approach, both governments set up a bilateral private-sector 'Presidents' Council' that was charged with supporting the implementation of market reforms in Egypt. Led by Hosni Mubarak's son Gamal on the Egyptian side, it served as an important additional stabilizer of the regime by increasing the number of contacts for Egyptian businessmen amongst the Egyptian and, equally important, U.S. political elite (Alterman 2000; Momani 2003). It thus further cemented a situation where political change threatens the interests of those capitalists who owe their economic status to the regime (Richter 2007, Sfakianakis 2004).¹⁰ When the Egyptian Centre for Economic Studies, which many of Gamal Mubarak's closest associates continue to dominate (King 2007), became a recipient of National Endowment for Democracy funds from 1993 to 2002,¹¹ U.S. democracy assistance even ended up supporting the domestic and international networking of the heir-apparent of Egypt's authoritarian ruler.

U.S. policies thus played a significant role in facilitating Cairo's shift from the allocation of rent income to broad segments of society to co-opting business interests - a policy necessitated by the structural readjustment programmes demanded by international donors in the 1980s and 90s (Albrecht/Schlumberger 2004; King 2007). By helping pre-empt the emergence of alternative power centres among the Arab world's business elites, Washington strengthened what comparative studies have described as an important contributor to the stability of authoritarianism in the region (Bellin 2004; Langohr 2004; Kamrava/O'Mora 1998).

In addition, the long-standing U.S. approach to free trade might even intensify the region's social problems as long as transnational investors can easily exploit existing social structures (Moore/Schrank 2003). The associated increase of inequalities in income distribution further exacerbates what, as the modernization approach admits, constitutes a serious obstacle to democracy (Lipset 1993; Issawi 1956) and explains Egypt's return to an era of political de-liberalization as the direct outcome of the regime's attempts to exclude the losers of economic liberalization from the political process (Kienle 2001).¹²

The 'Baghdad Spring' and the External Dimension of Authoritarian Resilience in the Arab World

With the image of democratization firmly established at least on the level of U.S. official discourse if not policy it was not surprising that in the context of the shifting justifications for the Iraq War President Bush turned to this issue as an overarching public rationale for his administration's policy towards the Middle East. Focusing on the establishment of Iraq as a 'regional beacon' (Enterline/Greig 2005), the neoconservative assumption of a 'regional tsunami' (Muravchik 2002) that would overwhelm the surrounding authoritarian regimes could have found some theoretical underpinnings within the transition approach established by Dankwart Rustow (1970) and later represented most prominently by O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead (1986). The emphasis on the decisions of political actors over material conditions (Schmitz/Sell 1999) and the powerful effects of (regional) diffusion (Gleditsch/Ward 2006; Schmitter 2001; Grugel 1999) made it attractive for policy-makers and those working in the democratization business eager to see democracy promotion take place despite real or perceived social, economic or even cultural obstacles (Carothers 2002). In contrast to the modernization approach where the international sphere features only

indirectly through the promotion of economic development, the transition school examines the international context for patterns of ‘contagion’ within regional clusters, ‘neutral transmission mechanisms’, as well as the exercise of control by an external actor through ‘sticks’ and ‘carrots’ (Whitehead 2001).

At first glance, the fragile democratization process in Iraq seemed to confirm the conventional wisdom that external threats and international conflicts explain the lack of democracy in the Arab Middle East (Gause 1995). It allowed authoritarian regimes and their media allies to delegitimize external and domestic calls for reform by linking them to a U.S. project of domination (Ehteshami/Wright 2007).¹³

Yet, developments in Saudi Arabia and Egypt show that (increased) popular hostility toward U.S. policies might actually undermine authoritarian resilience. While neoconservatives had hoped to create pressure on Arab regimes through the symbol of U.S. success in Iraq, it was now the Arab governments’ failure to stop the perceived U.S. ‘aggression’ which increased domestic demands for political reform. For instance, the signatories of a January 2003 letter to then Crown Prince Abdullah astutely played on the widespread fear that Saudi Arabia itself could become a target of the ‘war on terror’ (Aarts 2004) by presenting their call for reform as a pledge to stand with their leaders ‘in facing all dangers which threaten our country’s present and future’ (Saudi National Reform Document 2003).¹⁴ As had happened in the aftermath of the 1990-91 Gulf war crisis (Dekmejian 1998), the Saudi regime reacted with seemingly inclusive reform measures. First amongst them was then Crown Prince Abdullah’s ‘National Dialogue’, which provided a forum for unprecedented discussions of religious differences, education, gender, extremism and the prospect of municipal elections (Kechichian 2004). In Egypt, the nationalist opposition benefited from the fact that Cairo felt pressured to allow and even co-opt large-scale demonstrations against the Iraq war. As a member of al-Wafd, Egypt’s near-dormant liberal opposition party, explained, ‘it would have been a real shame to see massive rallies in the U.S. and Britain and not in Egypt (quoted in Shahin 2003).’ In the

end, the anti-Iraq demonstrations that occurred with and without governmental support in Egypt in early 2003 marked the beginning of an increasing association between regional crises and national affairs in the public's mind. As had happened during the 1977 bread riots (this time assisted by e-mail and cell phones), formerly politically unaffiliated people became active in setting up and participating in previously unthinkable public demonstrations on a subject of broad public concern. The audacity of the 'Kefaya' ('Enough') movement in breaking the taboo on public debate about presidential succession was as remarkable as the diversity of its support base, which included members of the Nasserist Karama and the Islamist al-Wasat party, under the initial leadership of the leftist Christian George Ishak (Albrecht 2007, Shorbagy 2007). Going further than their nationalist counterparts in Saudi Arabia, their founding document described 'foreign threats' and 'political despotism' as 'a cause and a result of the other' (quoted in Shorbagy 2007, p. 186). Even though the ruling regime was not willing to expand the scope of tolerated political activities, unprecedented public protests at least increased the comparatively low costs of suppression which some see as an important factor in the stability of Middle Eastern authoritarianism (Bellin 2004).

It was in this context of embryonic street politics and the open online and satellite TV debates about the health and failures of political leaders, torture and the role of religious authorities (Human Rights Watch 2007; Skovgaard-Petersen 2006; Lynch 2006) that Arab autocrats realized a couple of years before their Iranian peers faced a much more serious challenge in the summer of 2009 that 'complex communicative interdependence' (Schmitter 2001) and a greater 'density of ties' (Levitsky/Way 2005) can constitute powerful tools of democratic contagion and consent. In 2008, Saudi Arabia and Egypt therefore drew up a 'Charter of Principles for Regulating Satellite Broadcasting in the Arab Region' which allowed the signing Arab governments to suspend or revoke the licences of satellite networks deemed to 'negatively affect social peace, national unity, public order, and public morals' or to 'defame

leaders, or national and religious symbols (of other Arab states)' (quoted in Human Rights Watch 2008).¹⁵

It thus becomes clear that the Arab regimes can still rely on two important pillars of authoritarianism in fending off the effects of contagion and consent: scope, needed to systematically stifle opposition through detention and lawsuits, and cohesion, required during a violent crackdown on demonstrations or the outright manipulation of elections (Way/Levitsky 2006). So far, Arab elites could rely on the shrewd manipulation of the rules of the political game to stifle political opposition at a level which escapes broader Western criticism (Lust-Okar 2005 and 2007; Kassem 2004). They therefore exemplify societies where political elites are still capable of blocking norm empowerment (Checkel 1997).

It is in this political context where control and conditionality might protect nascent domestic calls for political reform from their own governments (Schmitter 2001) that contrary to arguments against conditionality (Dalacoura 2005), the reluctance to utilize political conditionality negatively impacts the long-term prospects of political reform in the Middle East. While it would be naive to ignore the fact that rationally calculating local elites will always be concerned about what they perceive as an externally instigated or sponsored threat to the status they hold or aspire (Kienle 2007; Perthes 2004; Schlumberger 2006),¹⁶ external pressure can make a difference in the context of political elites still blocking the spread of human rights and political reform norms by creating some political space for international human rights efforts and discourse to unfold (Sikkink 2004).

Previous case studies have shown that it would suffice to entice governments to shy away from the overt repression of the interaction between national and international non-governmental organizations, thus creating the breathing space required to let unthreatening 'learning' take place. While it is empirically very difficult to establish where strategic bargaining ends and persuasion begins in the institutionalization of international norms, Risse/Ropp (1999) are adamant that norm-violating governments which initially feel

pressured to ‘talk the talk’ in order to generate Western (donor) support ultimately face ‘argumentative self-entrapment’ which might prevent a retreat to norm-violating behaviour. This begs the question about the extent to which the United States in particular has been prepared and capable of making use of the tested means of aid allocation, gestures of approval or disapproval and the network of military and security ties (Whitehead 2001; Huntington 1991) in order to entice/force its authoritarian Arab allies to allow such learning.

Standing at the Sidelines – The United States and the Use of Conditionality

Reflecting the varying degrees of their interdependencies with the United States, Saudi Arabia and Egypt face differing levels of vulnerability or openness to conditionality. While resource rentiers like Saudi Arabia depend on global market conditions beyond their immediate control, they are harder to influence through negative conditionality. In general, U.S. leverage is mostly limited to arms sales and Riyadh’s interest in further integrating its economy into global markets, which in both case is inherently influenced by U.S. Congressional electoral politics. Legislative measures incorporating conditionality thus stand the best chance of Congressional approval when issues such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and the level of the oil price make it politically prudent for the individual member to support them.

Given the different nature of its relationship with the U.S., Cairo relies to a significant degree on its perceived role as a facilitator of Washington’s policies in its attempts to pre-empt negative conditionality on strategic rents, i.e. externally extracted income based on the geo-strategic considerations of international actors (Gause 1995), which in the case of the more than US\$1 billion annual military aid helps the Egyptian regime to double what it is spending on its military (Richter 2007). While the decades-long history of Egypt’s pro-Western foreign policy orientations means that its military already boasts strong ties with Western, and especially U.S. colleagues, the fact remains that the focus on higher military budgets and

continuous technological advancement makes its leaders very interested in maintaining close relations with the United States (Droz-Vincent 2007). Since highly institutionalized meritocratic militaries are deemed to be more open to political reform and more interested in international ties (Bellin 2004), Egypt seems to constitute an example where external encouragement could be especially fruitful. It would thus realize Heydemann's call for targeted attempts to weaken the coalitions on which 'authoritarian upgrading' rests (Heydemann 2007).

Partially launched in order to demonstrate that President Bush's focus on democratization was not all about retrospectively justifying the war in Iraq, the Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI) provides an example of positive conditionality by offering Arab countries U.S. support in their efforts to join the World Trade Organization and establish closer security and military ties with the United States and Europe if they engage in political and economic reforms (Middle East Intelligence Bulletin 2004). It could therefore have compensated the lack of a Middle Eastern international organization which, in other regional contexts, had played a reform-conducive role by helping overcome the fears of liberalization among the ruling elite as the perceived 'external guarantor of rights and preferences, or by altering preferences through a socialization process (Pevehouse 2002, 525).'

The initiative's suggestion that the region's civil society organizations, including human rights and media NGOs, should 'operate freely without harassment or restrictions' and receive increased direct funding (GMEP Working Paper) promised to address the lack of a sufficient number of truly autonomous civil society actors capable of challenging the 'fear, deference and patterns of social subordination' at the heart of authoritarian rule (Grugel 1999).¹⁷

In the context of weak political parties (Albrecht 2005; Stacher 2004), the GMEI threatened to unravel Cairo's attempts to create a tame civil society whose 'democracy language' had ensured goodwill of Western donors in times of financial crises (Albrecht/Schlumberger 2004). Ignoring the proposals' emphasis on bottom-up calls for reform, Mubarak and then-

Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah insisted that reforms could not be imposed ‘from outside’ and had to be in line with ‘Arab identity’ (quoted in Ghafour 2004).

When 74 participants representing 52 civil society organizations from 13 Arab countries met in Beirut in March 2004, they condemned their governments’ efforts to invoke ‘cultural or religious particularities (...) as a pretext to doubt and to question the universality of the principles of human rights’, urged Arab governments ‘to review and develop the contents of religious discourse with religious or non-religious educational curriculums and to reinvigorate the curriculum with the ideas of religious innovators’, and rejected attempts to ‘manipulate’ the Arab-Israeli conflict and the then-ongoing war on terror to justify the slow progress or even lack of political reform (quoted in Faath 2005, pp. 80-82).

In the end, Arab governments were able to exploit European scepticism toward an initiative that seemed to overshadow their own cooperation with the region within the Barcelona Process (Wittes 2004a). While stipulating that such acknowledgements should not be exploited to defer reform, the text which that year’s G8 summit approved described the Arab-Israeli conflict as ‘an important element of progress in the region’ and stated that respect for the uniqueness of each country would have to mean that ‘each society will reach its own conclusions about the pace and scope of change’ (The White House 2004).

With the war in Iraq putting increasing strains on U.S. diplomatic resources, Arab governments were able to further mitigate the initiative’s long-term impact. Its flagship, the *Forum for the Future*, originally designed as a long-term showcase for Arab civil society activity, ceased to meet after its third annual conference in Amman in 2006. One year earlier, Egypt had already been able to forestall the gathering’s final communiqué by objecting to language that did not safeguard governmental prerogatives in the realm of civil society promotion (Wright 2005). Ironically, the forum itself had turned into a tool of ‘authoritarian upgrading’, when according to various U.S. and Arab participants, these regional gatherings were used to informally share expertise on how to thwart the very initiatives that were being

discussed during the formal sessions (Heydemann 2007). Washington's first ever attempt to set up a mechanism for positive conditionality had therefore failed before it was ever genuinely implemented.

The U.S. government tends to demonstrate a similar ambiguity in employing negative conditionality when Arab human rights activists are imprisoned. The success of a strategy to use politically motivated trials to contain domestic calls for political reform rests on the inability of domestic civil society to activate transnational partners who in turn lobby their government to pressure the human rights abusing regime (Keck/Sikkink 1998). This 'boomerang pattern' of successful transnational human rights mobilization depends on the strength and density of the networks, issue resonance, and the vulnerability of the target state (Keck/Sikkink 1998).

The Egyptian regime faced such mobilization when a national security court that usually dealt with Islamist terrorists sentenced prominent Egyptian-American academic and human rights campaigner, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, to seven years of hard labour. Charges such as 'defaming Egypt's image abroad' and 'accepting foreign money without approval of the Ministry of Social Affairs' were based on his outspoken views on Egypt's human rights record and his attempt to raise voter awareness through an EU-funded project. With journalists, human rights activists and a bipartisan coalition of U.S. politicians linking Ibrahim's fate with Washington's nascent freedom agenda, the White House felt compelled to publicly link additional post-9/11 security assistance with the satisfactory solution of Ibrahim's case. While this unprecedented conditioning of bilateral aid to Egypt on a human rights matter ultimately led to Ibrahim's acquittal on 18 March 2003, exactly one day before the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, it could not save Ibrahim from eventual self-imposed exile.

A similar case occurred when the Egyptian regime misjudged the resonance of its decision to imprison secular Egyptian opposition leader, Ayman Nour, only days after President Bush had declared the spread of freedom to be the central theme of his second term in office (Bush

2005) against the backdrop of Iraq's first national elections in decades and the election of Mahmud Abbas as the new Palestinian president in early 2005. After Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice more or less publicly considered cancelling a joint summit of the G8 and Arab countries, Hosni Mubarak not only ignored his earlier warnings about the dangers of political reform and announced a constitutional referendum to allow the holding of unprecedented multi-candidate presidential elections, but also allowed Ayman Nour to run for president (Kessler 2005).

In Saudi Arabia, a similarly high-profile case occurred in the context of conservative Minister of the Interior, Prince Nayef warning that the broadening of the public discourse condoned and possibly even encouraged by his more liberal half-brother, then-Crown Prince Abdullah (Doran 2004) still occurred within strict limits: 'I have said it clearly - *no to change, yes to development* (...) that does not clash with the principles of the nation' (quoted in Jones 2003, emphasis added). The signatories of a petition which demanded the establishment of a constitutional monarchy as a way of confronting Islamist terrorism and 'protecting the royal family and Saudi society' could not escape their conviction for 'address[ing] the public and appeal[ing] to it in respect of critical issues concerning the system of rule' and 'criticism of the people charged with authority in the Islamic regime', both arbitrary charges with no legal basis even in Saudi law (Human Rights Watch 2005a).¹⁸ Soon after Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared that 'peacefully petitioning their government (...) should not be a crime in any country (Rice 2005)', the new King Abdullah marked his accession to the throne by pardoning the three petitioners.

In both cases, Washington's authoritarian Arab allies knew that seemingly giving in to U.S. demands was a cost effective way of preventing a White House that treated democracy promotion more as a matter of shaping Western perceptions about its policies than about shaping political realities in the Arab world from seriously contemplating conditionality.

Both countries benefited from the fact that the premise of an insurmountable trade-off between democratization and regional peace-making would seemingly be confirmed by the outcome of the elections for Egypt's national assembly and the Palestinian legislative council in winter 2005/06. While some observers saw in the disciplined attendance and attention to legislative details of Muslim Brotherhood assemblymen a chance to overcome the traditionally dominance of the executive (Shehata/Stacher 2006), their significantly increased representation from 17 to 88 seats and Hamas's narrow, yet surprising victory (re-)turned attention to the Arab-Israeli conflict and the supposedly negative consequences of the precipitous introduction of elections.

Political elites in Saudi Arabia, for instance, viewed the Bush administration's successful campaign to generate Congressional approval for Saudi Arabia's 2005 accession to the World Trade Organization as part of a return to a closer strategic cooperation strained by 9/11 and the war in Iraq.¹⁹ In Egypt, the announcement of parting U.S. ambassador David Welch that USAID would grant funds to NGOs with direct political goals, including Saad Eddin Ibrahim's Ibn Khaldun Centre, was unprecedented, yet limited in scope.²⁰ The more profound decision to postpone, in the spirit of positive conditionality, discussions on a free trade agreement was mostly a reaction to the increasing frequency of open Congressional criticism of Egypt's human rights record, particular Congress' irritation about Cairo's decision to end the political motivated trial against Ayman Nour with a predetermined conviction (Dumke 2006; Human Rights Watch 2005b).²¹ Finally, the Bush administration made use of its Congressional allies to pre-empt or water down timid attempts to establish negative conditionality demanded by democracy promotion practitioners (Hamzawy/McFaul 2006; Heydemann 2007). When supporters of a stronger Congressional stance on political reform in Egypt were finally able to push through an amendment to an omnibus spending bill for 2008 that withheld \$100 million in aid to Egypt until the Secretary of State certified that the Egyptian government had undertaken steps to 'protect the independence of the judiciary',

‘curb police abuses’ and clamp down on the smuggling network between Egypt and Gaza, Secretary Rice made use of a national security waiver included in the aforementioned bill and released all funds. Nevertheless, the Egyptian side deemed this new Congressional attitude serious enough to set up an Egyptian-American parliamentary exchange programme led by Mustafa al-Feki, chairman of the Foreign Affairs committee in the Egyptian people’s assembly, and frequently staffed by members of Gamal Mubarak’s inner circle (Essam El-Din 2008).

In light of the mismatch between rhetoric and political reality in the Bush administration’s ‘freedom agenda’, Michael McFaul, Barack Obama’s campaign advisor on democratization and first Russia expert at the new national security council, suggested that the new administration would go about democratization ‘more effectively’:

The Obama administration must talk less and do more. President Bush delivered several lofty speeches explaining why the United States should promote freedom, yet Ayman Nour sits in jail in Egypt. Rather than speeches or even grand goals, the next administration should seek to achieve small, concrete outcomes that advance political freedoms in very tangible ways and do so, without talking about doing so (2008).

In reality, however, the Obama administration offered a mixture of less rhetoric and even less action on political reform. First, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton told Egyptian TV that ‘conditionality is not our policy (quoted in Schemm 2009).’ Second, the Obama administration eliminated the direct funding of civil society organizations (Traub 2009). Third, the Obama administration’s dramatically decreased ‘rule of law and human rights’ funding and civil society assistance to Egypt to \$8 million and \$7 million respectively in fiscal year 2010 from the \$18 million and \$31.75 million the Bush administration had spent in 2008 (Freedom House 2009, 45).

The Obama administration's attempt to push the Arab world toward grand gestures toward Israel as a way of starting a new round of peace negotiations also increased Saudi Arabia's leverage as a perceived regional diplomatic heavyweight (Henderson 2009). This is in addition to Riyadh's role as the world's largest oil supplier which will continue to shield its continually problematic human rights record from serious Western pressure. That is why Saudi Arabia's political elite feels compelled to dismiss as 'demagoguery' any talk about Western 'energy independence' brought about by technological advancement and alternative sources of energy (al-Faisal 2009).

Washington's new geostrategic outlook has prompted veterans of U.S. democratization efforts to warn against playing down democracy promotion in an effort to distance the Obama administration from the more controversial policies of its predecessor. This would be 'a historic mistake, paralleling the Bush administration's "ABC (anything but Clinton)" error in initially discarding the Arab-Israeli peace process (Dunne 2009, p. 130).'

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that contrary to the grand rhetoric of the Bush administration and the assumptions of its many critics (Kienle 2007), U.S. foreign-policy decision makers have still not implemented democracy promotion in the Middle East as a foreign policy goal in its own right. Instead, the assumptions provided by modernization theory have provided a fall-back option for U.S. policymakers unwilling or unable to pursue a more vigorous approach to democratization in the Arab world.

This approach continues to provide inadequate results for two reasons. First, the link between economic and political reform is not as straightforward as postulated. Second, a vicious circle exists linking authoritarian political structures, the failure to address increasing social and economic inequalities and the perceived to further limit the available political space. Third,

even when modernization processes spur the development of conditions conducive to democratic reform by raising education levels, authoritarian Arab governments have a proven track record of adapting to the accompanying challenge of a more outspoken public. This puts the onus on those international actors who have the capacity to increase the costs for suppressing clearly visible instances of democratic contagion and consent.

That is why the selective and, at-best, half-hearted approach President Bush adopted in his two terms in office is so important. It laid the foundation for a decade of lost opportunities created by domestic calls for political change in both Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The claim that conditionality does not work is therefore not based on sufficient empirical evidence. It has never been consistently implemented.

Empirical evidence presented here indicates that a combination of the U.S. inspired 'conflict' approach aimed at empowering specific actors and the more cautious 'norms' approach commonly associated with EU human rights promotion policies suggested by Burnell (2005) is applicable to the Middle East as well. As demonstrated above, conditionality has an important role to play in both instances, especially when more direct means of intervention such as financial support to specific organization either remain subject to accusations of neo-imperialist interference or run into the problem of creating a class of human rights campaigners seemingly detached from the concerns of their fellow citizens (Langohr 2004; Abdel Rahman 2002). First, positive and negative conditionality can be employed to make the clampdown on domestic actors who peacefully work toward political and social change much more costly for the incumbent regimes than is the case at the moment. By changing the cost-benefit calculus of political elites who could, up until now, rely on regime scope and cohesion to curtail freedom of association, expression and demonstration the U.S. government would go a long way in empowering local actors who are willing and able to suggest and promote local solutions to local problems. Second, increasing the political breathing room for local actors would also stimulate and safeguard those processes of norm-empowering and learning

recent analyses of ways to promote human rights protection have emphasized. As such the use of conditionality would constitute the “missing link” not only in the analysis of authoritarian resilience but also between US and EU attempts to formulate coherent democratization strategies.

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- ¹ General overviews and comparisons of democracy promotion offer Burnell 2005, Cox/Ikenberry/Inoguchi 2000, Carothers 1999, and Kopstein 2006. Carapico 2002 focuses on the Middle East in particular. Brynen/Korany/Noble 1995 contains more optimistic assessments of the chances and limits of liberalization in the post-Cold War Arab. Reflecting a recent trend in the academic literature Brownlee 2007, Schlumberger 2007; Lust-Okar 2005; and Kassem 2004 focus on the sources of continued authoritarian resilience.
- ² On the international dimensions of democratization see Whitehead 2001; for the international dimensions of authoritarian resilience in general see Schlumberger 2007; Kienle 2007; Brownlee 2002; for a case study of Egypt see Richter 2007; for Saudi Arabia see Aarts 2004.
- ³ In his 1993 paper, Lipset himself quoted scholars whose 'Orientalist' views on the supposedly 'hostile' cultural landscape of the Muslim world makes them very sceptical regarding the likelihood of democratization (pp.5-6).
- ⁴ The limits of US democracy assistance are also evident in absolute terms by comparing the first five years after 9/11 with the US efforts in post-Soviet states in the first five years after the end of the Cold War. According to Wittes and Yerkes, the US spent only \$0.8 per capita in the Middle East in comparison to \$14.6 in the former Soviet Union (Wittes/Yerkes 2006, 11).
- ⁵ Its score was significantly higher than the one of poorer Egypt (-0.54) which ranked close to the Muslim majority countries of democratic Turkey (-0.34) and Indonesia (-0.50) as well as non-democratic Iran (-0.45).
- ⁶ Both joined the partly free Colombia, Nigeria, and Venezuela as the only countries out of 36 with more emphasis on 'expression values' which had not achieved 'free' status in the 2009 Freedom House ranking. The closest Muslim countries were Turkey (-0.34), Iran (-0.45), and Indonesia (-0.50) (World Values Survey 2009).
- ⁷ Przeworski/Limongi (1997) established a per capita income of US\$6000 as the threshold above which no democracy had ever failed until 1990, the final year covered in their analysis.
- ⁸ Author interviews in Washington, DC, 13 October 2005, and Riyadh, 16 November 2005. Yamani (2008) also acknowledges that membership in the WTO supported King Abdullah's attempts to roll back the Saudi royal family's over-burdening influence over the country's economy.
- ⁹ The decline in their overall-standing in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index from 70th to 105th place in the case of Egypt and 46th to 79th in the case of Saudi Arabia in the years 2003 to 2007 are indicative of these challenges (Transparency International 2008).
- ¹⁰ The U.S. representatives on the council hailed mainly from the oil, telecommunications and pharmaceutical industries (Momani 2003).
- ¹¹ See data at Democracy Projects Database. National Endowment for Democracy. Available on: <http://www.ned.org/dbtw-wpd/textbase/projects-search.htm> [Accessed 5 July 2005].
- ¹² A 2008 survey showed that 56 percent of responding Egyptians deemed international trade as 'bad' for their standard of living. 64 percent blamed international trade for job insecurity (World Public Opinion 2008).
- ¹³ In a 2007 poll, 92 percent of Egyptians supported the notion that it was a goal of the United States 'to weaken and divide the Islamic world' (PIPA 2007).
- ¹⁴ In a sign of growing Shiite self-confidence, a liberal Shiite critic of Sunni conservatives suggested that in the case of a break-away of the Shiite Eastern province the religious Wahhabi 'fanatics' of Saudi Arabia's desert heartland could try 'eating sand'. Author interview, Riyadh, 16 November 2005.
- ¹⁵ The Egyptian government was especially irritated by what it viewed as al-Jazeera's attempts to 'incite' people to participate in a failed general strike in April 2008 by showing pictures of the 1977 bread riots (MEMRI 2008).
- ¹⁶ As Perthes put it: 'Why, one might ask, should anyone expect a leader who has just inherited power to share it or risk it through democratic elections, unless forced to do so through constitutional or other constraints? Why should the advisors of that heir, and second-circle elites who owe their positions to him, urge him to open the political system and hold elections that would allow others to compete for the positions that they have just obtained (2004, 305)?'
- ¹⁷ For comparative assessments of the general weakness of Arab civil society see Kamrava/O'Mora (1998) and Schlumberger (2006).
- ¹⁸ Author interview, Riyadh, 16 November 2005.
- ¹⁹ Author interview with Turki al-Faisal, former Saudi ambassador to the United States and the United Kingdom and former Chief of Saudi intelligence, Riyadh 20 November 2005. Despite strong Congressional pressure, Riyadh felt even strong to continue its participation in the Arab League's economic boycott of Israel even though the US representative claimed it had received pledges to the contrary (Prados/Blanchard 2006, 15-16).
- ²⁰ This decision was all the more remarkable since the USAID programme had long been regarded as not more than a means to ensure Egyptian cooperation in U.S. Middle East policies that fell outside the scope of developmental or human rights considerations. Author interview with former Assistant Secretary of State for Middle Eastern Affairs and Ambassador to Egypt Robert H. Pelletreau, Washington, DC, 23 July 2001.
- ²¹ Gamal Mubarak's Egyptian Centre for Economic Studies and influential U.S. companies such as General Electric, through their representatives within the aforementioned U.S.-Egyptian 'Presidents' Council', have been lobbying very strongly in favour of such an agreement for a considerable time (Wahish 2005; Sami 2001).