

Chapter 6: Chapter exercises

Responding to the 'freedom deficit': The influence of the outside on reform and democracy in the Middle East

Before 2001, western governments had a superficial interest in the promotion of democracy in the Middle East. Despite President Bill Clinton's overtures for democracy, his leading Middle East adviser Martin Indyk thought democracy in Arab states to be destabilizing and detrimental to the peace process with Israel. As such, they were happy to deal (and thus tacitly support) with authoritarian governments in the region.

After the attacks of 11 September 2001, Western and US perspectives on political reform changed dramatically in their policies towards the Middle East. This change primarily involved the pursuit of westernized notions of democratic freedom across the region that would serve as an ideological barrier to extremist Islam, which had been active in Egypt, Syria, and Tunisia. The 'freedom deficit' of the authoritarian governments, according to the Bush administration, had resulted in political oppression that led people turn out of despair to ideologies of hatred and violence.

In order to obtain domestic security, the US has fought a global campaign against terrorist extremists that has been used as the basis to justify the invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq. In the case of Iraq, the toppling of Saddam Hussein presented an opportunity to transform an authoritarian regime into a democracy. As the poster child of democracy in the region, its success was short-lived. There was too much unhappiness and resentment against the Allied armies in Baghdad and the rest of the country. As such, the instilling democracy in the region was cancelled out by the invasion of the country.

Since the immediate post-war period, US foreign policy towards the Middle East had largely been driven by the need to maintain the status quo, ensuring the protection of the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf, underwriting the security of Israel, and tackling rogue states. However, after the collapse of the US-backed style of government in Iraq, the descent of the country into chaos, and the rise of so-called Islamic State, notions of reform and change have fallen from the shoulders of external factors to internal ones.

With the rise of the development of education levels in the region, people's expectations have become more complex. The government's traditional patriarchal approach to government is no longer viable. In Saudi Arabia, the government in Riyadh has tried to appeal to its citizens by passing some modest reforms, among which a large stimulus package to include the creation of jobs, giving women the permission to vote, and to stand for local elections. However, in the case of Bahrain, it is even more complex as the complaints of its citizens coincide with sectarian differences. With a Sunni royal family and a largely Shia population, protests against the government take on a religious flavour. The ruling elite has close relations with Saudi Arabia and is under US influence; through the use of force, the strength of the protests has been reduced but with neighbouring Shia Iran just across the Gulf, the situation in Bahrain is becoming more and more international and complex.

Is the 'Iraq case' a failed example of democracy in the Middle East? What was the western governments' role in that?

Is Islam the principle driver of democracy in the region? Why?

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