Summary

Setbacks to political liberalization in the Arab world have caused the United States to turn away from support for democrats there in favor of “pragmatic” deals with tyrants in order to defeat violent Islamist extremism. This strategy is dangerously shortsighted: “Our own interests are best served by Arab governments that are legitimate, decent, and stable and are able to combat extremism effectively.”

In *Realism and Democracy: American Foreign Policy after the Arab Spring*, Elliott Abrams, a senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, advocates for an American foreign policy that combines both practical politics and idealism in supporting those struggling for democracy and human rights in the Arab world. He argues that governments that rule through brute force, without any legitimacy in the eyes of their own population, are ultimately unstable and unreliable allies for the United States.

The book examines the United States’ record of democracy promotion in the region and beyond, from the Cold War to the Barack Obama years. Abrams makes several recommendations to U.S. policymakers, concluding that “Our principles and our security interests both suggest that we should
be giving repression and tyranny far more effective opposition, and freedom and democracy far more effective support.”

**Main Takeaways**

The United States should:

1. Place promoting democracy and defending human rights back at the center of U.S. foreign policy.
2. Ensure that the president and secretary of state, not career diplomats or lower-ranking officials, are seen as the primary sources of diplomatic statements and actions to make clear that support for human rights and democracy starts at the top.
3. Refrain from supporting and strengthening illegitimate regimes, and press for gradual but real political openings in Arab states that repress liberal, moderate, and democratic voices—forces that are a main bulwark against Islamist extremist ideas.
4. Recognize that assistance programs for nongovernmental organizations and civil society cannot substitute for top-level American political support and efforts to open political space for real competition.
5. Remember that a global belief in U.S. support for freedom remains an invaluable asset for the country.

This book is suitable for the following types of undergraduate and graduate courses:

- U.S. Foreign Policy
- Middle East Politics

**Discussion Questions**

**Courses on U.S. Foreign Policy**

1. How has the role of democracy promotion in U.S. foreign policy changed over time?
2. Is democracy promotion in the national interest of the United States?
3. Some describe U.S. democracy promotion efforts as a failure. Others consider them a hallmark of American foreign policy success. Which of these perspectives is a better assessment of American foreign policy?
4. Is there a difference between promoting respect for human rights and promoting democracy?
5. Compare and contrast the attitudes and policies toward democracy promotion of the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations.
6. Incorporating the recommendations Abrams makes in *Realism and Democracy*, how would you assess the efforts of the Donald J. Trump administration in promoting democracy in the Middle East?
Courses on Middle East Politics

1. Why does the Arab Middle East appear to have a worse record on democracy than any other region of the globe?
2. What role can nongovernmental organizations play in promoting democracy and human rights in the Middle East?
3. What are the benefits and drawbacks of political transitions from autocracy to democracy?
4. What challenges do political openings pose for citizens living under autocratic regimes that begin a transition to a more open political system?
5. What lessons can Middle Eastern activists learn from democracy movements during the Cold War, whether in Latin America, Asia, or Europe?
6. What is the status of democracy in the Middle East today?

Essay Questions

Courses on U.S. Foreign Policy

Write a 1,500-word essay on one of the following subjects:

1. Repression gives Islamists significant advantages over centrists, moderates, and democrats, while political openings offer them a chance—at winning elections and succeeding in governing. In light of Abrams's recommendations, assess two Middle Eastern countries in which the moment is ripe for such a U.S.-backed political opening. If you feel none exists, explain.
2. What were the most critical mistakes the United States made in approaching the Arab Spring, vis-à-vis democracy promotion and human rights?

Courses on Middle East Politics

Write a 1,500 word essay on one of the following subjects:

1. Explain why the Arab Spring appears to have brought democracy to Tunisia while Egypt has returned to autocracy.
2. Some experts say Morocco has been the most successful Middle Eastern monarchy to liberalize its political system gradually, while others point to Jordan. As Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman seeks to introduce reforms in Saudi Arabia, what lessons should he draw from the Moroccan and Jordanian monarchies?

Further Projects

Policy Memorandum

Imagine that you are a National Security Council (NSC) official in an administration which cultivates close ties with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi. Write a 1,000-word policy memorandum, making the case for a reconfigured relationship while focusing on the importance of promoting human rights and political openings for long-term U.S. strategic interests.
Debate
Act as though you are a NSC official involved in drafting an administration’s first National Security Strategy. Your superiors on the Council are torn between promoting democracy and aligning with stable autocrats. With one classmate, debate these two divergent approaches.

Supplementary Materials


