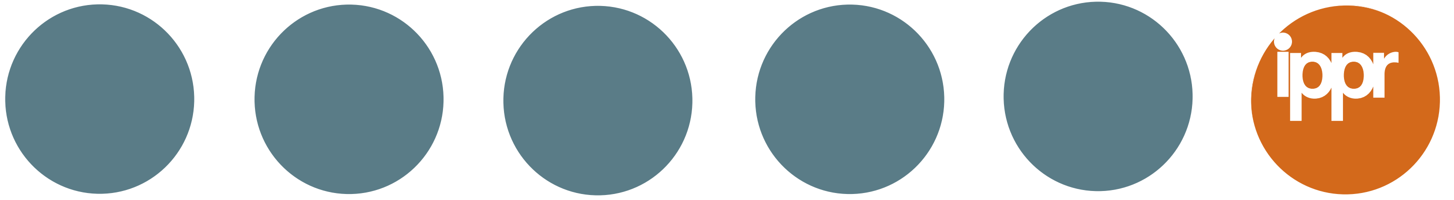

Changing states

A progressive agenda for political reform in the Middle East

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Definitions

For the purposes of this paper, the Middle East is defined as the 22 states of the Arab League (minus Mauritania and Somalia), plus Israel and Iran. While Turkey is sometimes treated as part of the Middle East, it is not included in the definition for this particular paper.

Introduction

The issue of political reform in the Middle East has never been higher on the international agenda.[1] But it was pushed up that agenda not by progressive governments or political parties – those for whom democracy, human rights, gender equality and social justice are supposed to be defining values - but rather by a right-wing neo-Conservative administration in the United States. In response to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, significant voices in the US policy community called for a fundamental shift in US strategy towards the Middle East. They argued that the region's lack of liberty was a primary cause of Islamic extremism, and that addressing the region's 'democracy deficit' was essential to stem the growth of global terrorism and to enhance the security of the US and its Allies (Carothers and Ottaway, 2005).[2]

Rhetorically at least, the Bush administration has bought this argument. In the last couple of years the President has regularly made speeches calling on the region's leaders to liberalise and democratise. The most detailed account of this new approach was set out in a speech he gave to the National Endowment for Democracy in November 2003, where he announced that his administration:

> 'would replace the long-standing US policy of unquestioning support for friendly authoritarian Arab regimes with a "new forward strategy of freedom" in the Middle East.' (Hawthorne, 2005: 61)

The Bush administration has also tried to strengthen the international commitment to democratic change in the region. The Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative, agreed by the G8 countries in 2004, is one example of this. Under the Initiative, G8 countries are committed to working together on a new political dialogue with governments and other economic and social actors in the Middle East.

Of course, by far the most controversial aspect of recent US policy towards the Middle East has been the war with Iraq. While there were many motivations for US action, and while the despotic nature of Saddam Hussein's regime was certainly not the decisive one, the administration sought to justify its intervention, at least in part, on the grounds that a democratic Iraq would help to spread democracy across the region as a whole. More than two-and-a-half years on, that argument lacks credibility. With the country still desperately unstable, and with horrific acts of violence and terror occurring almost daily, there is little immediate prospect of Iraq triggering democratic change across the region as a whole.

While the Iraq War has intensified the debate about reform across the Middle East and created the possibility of a more democratic future for the Iraqi people, it has also greatly inflamed anti-US and anti-Western feeling and strengthened the hand of Islamic extremists and other anti-democratic forces across the region.

The multiple failings of US policy in Iraq are matched by wider flaws and inconsistencies in the administration's policy towards reform in the region. To highlight these is not to engage in cheap anti-Americanism. The US administration is right to be calling for political change in the region. And to make progress on reform, the world needs the US to play a more constructive role in the Middle East. But the existing policy of the Bush administration falls very well short of what is required.

The US lacks credibility in the Middle East as a force for democracy and human rights because of its largely uncritical support for Israel, its military, diplomatic and often financial backing for many of the more authoritarian regimes in the region and as a result of the war in Iraq. The Bush administration's credibility is further undermined by its contravention of international human rights and humanitarian law in cases like Guantanamo Bay and through its practice of 'extraordinary renditions' (the process of detaining and transferring terrorist suspects to third countries, beyond the reach of normal legal processes and safeguards, for the purposes of interrogation).[3]

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1. Political reform in the Middle East is not a wholly new issue for donors and the international community. For example, it featured in the conditionalities attached to international lending in the 1990s and it was put on the agenda between the EU and the southern Mediterranean states in the mid-1990s in the context of the Barcelona Process. But political reform in the Middle East has become a much more high-profile international political issue following the 11 September attacks on the US.

2. While there is a possible connection between the lack of democracy in the Arab world and anti-Western Islamic terrorism, the Administration's assertion of a clear-cut linkage between the two is questionable. The most recent research evidence, for example that carried out by Katarina Dalacoura of the LSE, suggests that the link is unproven.

3. There have been many allegations, not adequately refuted by members of the Bush administration, that individuals detained in this way have been subject to torture and other forms of cruel and degrading treatment.

Even when it is particularly outspoken on the need for greater democracy, for example in its recent dealings with President Mubarak of Egypt, it is doubtful that the administration will really give more priority to political reform than to co-operation on anti-terrorism. A number of those transferred for interrogation and possible torture under the practice of extraordinary rendition have been taken to Egypt (Mayer, 2005).

And insofar as the administration is genuinely prepared to support democratisation in particular countries in the region, it lacks a convincing theory as to how this change will come about (Dalacoura, 2005). The administration has given little indication, for instance, as to how it imagines a country like Saudi Arabia making the change from a closed and authoritarian state to a more open and liberal one.

But none of this should provide progressives with any cause for smugness or complacency. Over many years progressives have not spoken out strongly or consistently enough in support of human rights and democratic values in the Middle East. When in government, progressive parties have often failed to use this opportunity to support those in the region that are working to reform their societies from within. Moreover, they have generally been stronger in criticising others than in putting forward their own proposals.

In the case of the Iraq war, for example, many opposed the US/UK military intervention. While there were very good reasons for doing so, the war's critics had much less to say about the plight of the Iraqi people, suffering under the double burden of Saddam Hussein's regime and highly damaging international sanctions. This is not an argument for an ill-thought-out military intervention. But it is an argument for thinking more seriously about the promotion of human rights and democratic freedoms in the region. Progressives should be advocates of change in the Middle East, not defenders of a predominantly autocratic and illiberal status quo.

That means taking on the arguments of the neo-Conservatives in Washington. But it also means challenging more traditional, small 'c' conservative attitudes towards the Middle East, for example the view that the peoples of the Middle East are ill suited to more liberal and accountable governance and that the attempt to promote such a concept in the region is naïve, if not downright dangerous.

These arguments should be rejected. Of course, political change carries risks - ones that need to be intelligently managed. One of the most frequently cited 'risks' is that Islamists will be the major beneficiaries of political liberalisation in the Middle East. As discussed later in this paper, while this is a reasonable concern, those who highlight it tend to downplay the diversity of political Islamists in the region and the extent to which some Islamists have moderated their positions in recent years. Nor do they suggest a better alternative for addressing the phenomenon of political Islamism than the attempted engagement of Islamists in the political process. Repression of Islamists and their systematic exclusion from political institutions is a recipe for instability and extremism, not moderation.

More generally, the risks of sticking with the status quo in the Middle East are likely to be greater than those associated with managed political change (UNDP 2002). The political stagnation that characterises much of the region is failing millions of its people and contributing to huge social tensions. Widespread repression, a lack of political voice, a sense of alienation and disempowerment – these are the very conditions that are breeding anger, extremism and violence. This anger is directed mainly at local rulers, but it can also impact outside the region, including through anti-western Islamic terrorism. There is a powerful security argument therefore, as well as a moral one, for trying to support political change in the region. This is reinforced by an economic argument. Political change in the Middle East could help to leverage more effective economic development, creating new opportunities for mutually beneficial trade and investment flows. Improved governance in the region is also a better long-term guarantee of secure access to its oil supplies than the fragility of the status quo.

But what exactly do we mean by political change in the Middle East? Progressives should be staunch defenders of the concept of universal values – and these values include the right to have a say in how one is governed, the right not to be mistreated, the right to free expression and the right to fair treatment before the law. These are the minimum defining parameters of democratic governance, as relevant in the Middle East as elsewhere.

But we know from the experience of other parts of the world that building sustainable democratic institutions can be a lengthy and complex process. We also know that there can be very real tensions between democracy (in the sense of majority rule) and liberty. The phenomenon of illiberal democracy is present in many parts of the world today, with democratically elected governments abusing the rights of their citizens, particularly those of minorities (Zakaria, 2003). In thinking about political change in the

Middle East – where the concept of a democratic culture is often very weak – we need to give as much emphasis to 'constitutionalism' as to elections, important though elections are. In this context, constitutionalism means a balance of powers, including checks on the executive; a fair and independent legal process; a free press and media; and the protection of human rights, including the rights of minorities.

It is also important to be realistic about what can be achieved in particular countries and over particular timescales. In some cases, support for political reform might involve pushing hard now for genuinely free elections. In other cases, a higher short-term priority for political reform might be encouraging an enlarged space in which opposition groups or civil society can function, greater freedom for the press, fairer legal processes, adherence to universal human rights standards, and support for educational reforms and cultural exchanges. None of this means weakening the commitment to democracy in the Middle East. But it does mean thinking more pragmatically about the policy options available in specific contexts and about the formal and informal ways of effecting change. This takes us to the objectives of this paper.

The paper has three specific purposes. Firstly, it seeks to assess honestly the current state of the region, the challenges that it faces and how these have arisen. Secondly, it aims to provide a critique of existing 'reform' policies towards the Middle East, particularly those of the current US administration but also those pursued by some European governments. Thirdly, it proposes a distinctively 'progressive' agenda for supporting political reform in the region.

The state of the Middle East

While the Middle East is enormously diverse, and while some of its countries are making important progress, as a region it performs poorly on many international indicators of democracy, governance and human rights, and it suffers from widespread and deeply entrenched authoritarianism (Posusney and Angrist, 2005). With the exception of Israel, none of the countries in the region can be fairly described as an established democracy. And even Israel's democratic credentials need to be qualified: Israel denies the democratic and many other rights of the Palestinians in the occupied territories; in certain ways it also discriminates against Arab citizens of Israel.[4]

Iraq's future remains uncertain. While the emergence of a stable democracy is one possibility, this looks a long way off. Sectarian division and civil war are also possible. Following the withdrawal of Syrian forces from the country, Lebanon has some prospects of developing genuinely democratic institutions, though there are concerns about the lingering influence of Syria. Genuine democracy in Lebanon will also require significant changes to the country's confessional system – where political power is divided up between the country's different ethnic and religious groups.

Among the other states in the region, eight are monarchies (Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates). A further six states have a dominant ruling party (Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen). Some of these states – Libya, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Tunisia – are best described as 'full autocracies', given that they rely very heavily on 'sheer force and intimidation' and they 'isolate, silence or repress almost all contending forces outside the ruling circle' (Brumberg, 2005).

Many of the other states might be better described as 'liberalised autocracies' or 'semi-authoritarian regimes', including countries like Morocco and Yemen. While these regimes also use intimidation and repress political opponents, unlike full autocracies, they have a higher 'threshold of tolerance for political openness' (Brumberg, 2005). In some cases, this threshold appears to have grown over the last couple of years. For example, there have been some very exciting and significant political developments in the Gulf, particularly in Kuwait but also in Qatar, Bahrain and Oman. To varying degrees the leaders of these states have been prepared to permit a greater degree of space for political debate, raising the possibility of more far-reaching political reform in the medium term (Crystal, 2005).

Iran is a different case again. While there is more pluralism and more open political debate than in many other countries in the region, the political rights of Iranians are ultimately subject to the limitations set by the country's clerical establishment. The Supreme Leader (a position created after the revolution in 1979)

4. For example, any land which is appropriated by the state or a public body like the Israel Lands Authority or the Jewish National Fund becomes 'inalienable Jewish patrimony', which means it cannot be sold to non-Jews, even non-Jewish, Arab citizens of Israel.

represents the highest power in the state. He is not elected but rather chosen by a clerical commission of ayatollahs. The Supreme Leader can legally overrule decisions taken by Iran's elected parliament. Iranian 'democracy' is also constrained by the country's Council of Guardians who judge whether candidates are suitable to run for election. For example in Iran's recent Presidential elections, of the 1000 people who applied to run for the position, all but eight were disqualified, including every female prospective candidate.

In many countries in the Middle East, parliaments and consultative councils have been created recently (and some perform useful roles). But in almost all cases these lack the authority to seriously challenge executive power. Elections are also widespread – another important development (Ehteshami, 2004). But while there is more freedom for opposition parties in some countries than in others, none of the elections held to date could be accurately described as 'free and fair': that is to say, with the exception of Israel (and possibly Lebanon), there is no case in the Middle East in which existing rulers are yet prepared to cede power to an alternative government through the ballot box.

> 'Although a spectrum of political liberalisation exists, actual democratisation remains elusive… Even the most advanced reformers have not opened up the main levers of political power to open political competition, levers that are held by either hereditary monarchs or strongman rulers backed by militaries and internal security forces that enjoy political impunity. Although the reform efforts in the region are diverse, they all fail to get at this central democratic deficit.' (Carothers and Ottaway, 2005: 8)

In respect of governance and public administration, there has been some recent progress in countries like Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Oman and Qatar. But across the Middle East, political and public institutions are often profoundly unaccountable and lacking in basic transparency. A World Bank study suggests that, when compared with countries that have similar incomes and characteristics, the Middle East region ranks bottom on their global index of overall governance quality (World Bank, 2005a).

This weakness of governance severely limits the capacity of ordinary people to influence the policies pursued by public authorities, for example in terms of the provision of public services. Nepotism, tribal affinity, patronage and money are still the primary determinants of who gets public services and who does not. Weak governance in the Middle East also stifles and distorts economic activity, worsening the investment and business climate for domestic and international investors. Businesses are generally reluctant to invest in a climate characterised by high transaction costs, extensive bureaucratic and political interference, prohibitive trade barriers, long customs clearance times and regional insecurity. This is a major explanation of the region's poor economic performance (World Bank, 2005b).

On human rights, some states in the region have taken initiatives to establish human rights commissions or to address previous human rights abuses. Morocco, for example, formed the Equity and Reconciliation Commission in 2004 to investigate state repression from 1956 to 1999. The Arab League has also shown a new (albeit limited) interest in human rights. At its May 2004 summit in Tunis, it approved revisions to the 1994 Arab Human Rights Charter that strengthen rights to fair trial and political asylum, prohibit torture and affirm gender equality. Furthermore, steps have been taken in some countries to improve women's rights. For instance, in 2004 Morocco approved a major revision of the personal status code that significantly expands women's rights in areas like marriage and divorce, child custody and inheritance. Egypt has also taken some modest steps to strengthen women's rights.

But serious human rights violations are still widespread in the Middle East. This includes extra-judicial killings, torture and ill treatment, restrictions on freedom of expression and the right of non-violent political dissent, systematic discrimination against women, religious intolerance and discrimination, and weak or non-existent protections for workers, particularly migrant workers. There is also some evidence that human rights conditions in the region have worsened since 11 September 2001, with many governments introducing broad anti-terrorism measures including mass detentions and heightened surveillance of political activity (Human Rights Watch, 2005).

Interpreting the Middle East

To set out some of these complex governance and human rights challenges facing the Middle East is not the same, of course, as interpreting or explaining them. This requires a deeper analysis of how these have arisen and why the region's rulers have generally shown themselves to be unable or unwilling to tackle them more effectively. Academics and Middle East specialists have put forward a range of different explanatory theories. Four such theories are worth highlighting here.

Culture and religion

First, there are those who put most emphasis on culture and religion, with Islam and Arab culture viewed as hostile to democratic values, human rights and market economics (Huntington, 1993; Sivan, 2003; Lewis, 2004). While this perspective has some powerful adherents – including within the Bush administration – it is hard to sustain the thesis that Islam per se is an insurmountable barrier to greater democracy or economic prosperity. A number of prominent Islamist thinkers have argued strongly that free and fair elections, universal suffrage, multi-party politics, minority rights and equal citizenship are fully consistent with Islam (Esposito, 1992; Kurzman, 1998; Ehteshami, 2004). Moreover, half of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims today live in democracies. Turkey, a predominantly Muslim country bordering the Middle East, has also made good recent progress in respect of democratic and economic development. And Muslim countries outside the Middle East such as Malaysia have developed highly successful economies, notwithstanding the religious beliefs of its people.

The notion of a fixed Arab culture is also suspect. There are enormous differences within and between Middle Eastern societies, and popular attitudes to issues of politics, religion, ethics and sexuality are diverse and constantly evolving. There are many values that people in the Middle East share with those living outside the region. To suggest, therefore, that a particular set of political or economic institutions are inevitably derived from a timeless despotic Arab culture lacks credibility. As Fred Halliday argues, it is historical sociology at its worst:

> '…neither historical, in that it denies change, nor sociological, in that it abstracts the state from social context, and contemporary international connection.' (Halliday, 2005)

The related claim of an Arab or Islamic 'exceptionalism' is questionable too, for example the view that Islam encourages military rule, violent conflict and authoritarianism. These phenomena are widely prevalent in other parts of the developing world and are not exclusive to Muslim societies.

That said, it would be foolish to ignore culture altogether. The political agendas promoted by even the most liberal Islamist movements in the region may differ in some important ways from the kind of reform agenda advocated by progressives in Europe or the US. For example, Islamist opposition groups in the Middle East may be demanding greater freedom of the press. But at the same time, they generally don't want the media to promote secularism, blaspheme against Allah or offer contraceptive advice to unmarried people. This should not mean caving in to partial democracy (democracy but not for women, or human rights but not for homosexuals). But it does mean a deeper dialogue with reformers in the region about what the priorities are, what can be compromised on, and what absolutely cannot.[5] It should also mean trying to better understand how attitudes and values change, for example through exposure to new ideas and influences.

Oil wealth

A second common explanation for the region's difficulties is the 'oil curse'. The Middle East accounts for around one third of the world's supply of oil and two thirds of known reserves. Initially, the discovery of oil wealth provided the resources to fund rapid economic and social development throughout the region, both for oil-producing countries as well as for the majority of countries in the region that are not oil producers. The latter group of countries benefited from labour remittances, transit fees and aid flows from their oil-rich partners. Oil wealth was used to fund social and welfare programmes. Oil has also transformed the place of the Middle East in the global economy and ensured high level engagement and

5. I am particularly indebted to Dr Emma Murphy of Durham University for her insights and examples in this area.

interest on the part of the world's wealthier and most powerful states. But some of the harmful consequences of this oil wealth emerged fairly quickly.

The phenomenon of oil dependency is not of course unique to the Middle East. An abundance of oil revenues has given rise to problems in countries like Angola, Indonesia, Nigeria, Russia and Venezuela. However, the sheer volume of oil resources located in the Middle East has profoundly and negatively shaped the political economy of the region. The Middle East's oil wealth has greatly strengthened the hand of the region's elites and reduced the need for them to develop any kind of meaningful social contract with their peoples. They have been able to distribute resources to cement their ties with key groups and to buy off any signs of discontent.

> 'Oil rents have been especially critical in the Gulf states… They enabled regimes to seek legitimacy by distributing goods and services to people rather than through the more interactive, demanding and risky approach of taxing them directly and being accountable to them.' (Henry and Springborg, 2004: 8)

Oil has acted as a major disincentive to economic diversification in the Middle East. There are few links between the oil sector and other parts of the economy. The oil sector employs very few nationals and most skilled personnel working in the oil industry have been brought in from other countries. Large amounts of oil money have been squandered on projects of dubious economic value or used to purchase huge quantities of sophisticated military equipment, most of it from the west.

This oil-financed build-up of arms has undermined regional security and worsened levels of regional tension. The limited nature of economic diversification in much of the region has also meant that few independent centres of economic power have emerged in Middle Eastern states that could foster or finance credible political opposition to existing ruling elites.

In addition, oil wealth has been used to finance the internal security and coercive apparatus of many Middle Eastern states, by paying the salaries of the military and security forces, guaranteeing them ready supplies of arms and ammunition, and by allowing the region's rulers to repress political opposition. In this way, oil wealth has contributed to the resilience of authoritarianism in the region (Bellin, 2005).

While 'the curse of oil' is not by itself an adequate explanation for some of the problems that bedevil the Middle East, it does go some way to explain why the region has not developed more liberal and accountable political institutions and more dynamic economies.

(Neo) colonialism

Third, there is a view that the region's political problems are a consequence of exploitative relations with external powers that have supported authoritarian rulers in the region to safeguard their own strategic and economic interests. While this thesis can be overstated, it does contain an important element of truth, both historically and in the present. For this reason, it is worth exploring this historical context at slightly greater length.

From the early 19th century until World War II, the key western external players were Britain and France. The French took on an imperial role in Algeria in 1830 and the British in Aden from 1839. This was followed by the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, and the extension of French control of Tunisia and Morocco in 1881 and 1911 respectively. In this period, the British also expanded their influence in the Persian Gulf.

But the real turning point was World War I. The defeat of the Ottoman Empire at the hands of the British and the French led to radical change in the Middle East. The existing state system in the Middle East dates from this point and was very largely the creation of Britain and France, with Britain the more influential of the two. The historian Roger Owen has described the pivotal role of Britain and France in this period:

> 'It was they who determined almost all of the new boundaries, they who decided who should rule, and what form of governments should be established; it was also they, in association with the Americans, who had a major say in how access to the region's natural resources should be allocated… Short as this period now seems, it was then that the basic framework for Middle Eastern political life was firmly laid – together with many of its still unresolved problems involving disputed boundaries, ethnic and religious tensions.' (Owen, 2004: 7)

This new order in the Middle East was strongly resented and challenged by many of the region's

inhabitants. Many Arabs, for example, felt betrayed by British and French promises to them during the war, specifically the pledge that they would support Arab unity and the creation of a single Arab state. At the same time as these promises were being made to traditional leaders like Hussein of the Hijaz (to gain support for an Arab revolt that would end Ottoman rule in the region), Britain was in secret negotiations with the French. In the infamous Sykes-Picot agreement, Britain and France agreed to divide up the region between them at the end of the war, which is indeed what happened.

Under a new legal instrument, the League of Nations mandate, Britain took control of Iraq, Palestine and Transjordan, while France assumed responsibility for Syria and Lebanon. In respect of Mandatory Palestine, Britain was also committed to implement the provisions of the Balfour Declaration of November 1917 calling for the establishment of a Jewish 'national home'. Outside the mandate framework, Britain retained a key role in Egypt and Ibn Saud was supported by Britain when he established the state of Saudi Arabia (which formally acquired independence in 1932).

In the inter-war period, there were major revolts against British and French rule, for example in Iraq, Palestine and Syria. These were crushed by military force. British and French influence was also instrumental in creating and shaping state structures and institutions in the region.

After World War II, the United States clearly emerged as the pre-eminent external power in the Middle East, particularly after the Suez crisis of 1956, which gravely weakened British and French influence. Following World War II, the Soviet Union also sought to exert greater influence in the region. As Bernard Lewis notes:

> 'They proceeded in much the same way as their western European predecessors – military bases, supply of weapons, military "guidance", economic and cultural penetration.' (Lewis, 2004: 77)

A number of the region's secular republics – Egypt is perhaps the best example – established close relations with the Soviets, as an alternative to reliance on the US and the western powers. But they quickly concluded that the Soviets lacked the US's capacity to effect change in the region and they had less to offer than the US in terms of practical assistance. In May 1971, the Egyptians signed a Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation with the USSR. But by July of the following year Sadat had ordered Soviet military advisers to leave the country, in an attempt to get closer to the US.

In the first few decades of the post-war period, US policy in the Middle East was caught up in the context of the Cold War and was driven by a perceived need to counter Soviet and local communist influence in the region. Support for pro-western rulers took precedence over other concerns. Nationalist politicians like Mohamed Mossadeq in Iran were overthrown with US (and UK) support when they appeared to challenge US strategic interests, including their access to oil resources. Conversely, authoritarian and anti-communist rulers like the Shah of Iran were supported because they served western interests.

The primary US strategic and economic interest in the Middle East over this period was, and remains, access to the region's oil. In support of this objective, the US has forged a very close relationship with the regime in Saudi Arabia and with the smaller oil-rich states in the Gulf, what Gilles Kepel calls the 'petro monarchies'. These relationships have been cemented by extensive US military assistance to these states and close security co-operation. Serious concerns about governance, human rights, corruption and public welfare have barely surfaced in US relations with local rulers, at least until recently.

US policy in the Middle East has also involved very strong support for Israel. This relationship deepened in the 1960s, particularly following the 1967 war. US support for Israel derives from a strong and influential pro-Israeli constituency within the US political system, and from a view among US policy makers that Israel is a strategic asset. But to many in the region, successive US administrations have displayed clear double standards in respect of the Israeli/Palestinian question. Despite its continuing illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories, Israel remains a recipient of massive financial and military assistance from the US. US military and economic assistance to Israel amounted to US$2.7 billion in 2004 (Human Rights Watch, 2005).

More recently, of course, the US and other western powers have been concerned to counter the growth of radical Islam in the Middle East. On the one hand this has led them to stress the need for political reform in the region. But on the other they remain highly dependent on many of the region's more authoritarian rulers in respect of security co-operation and intelligence information sharing – as well as access to oil. The western powers have been reluctant – and still are – to reduce their support for these regimes, even when

these countries have very poor human rights records.

The claim that external powers have stymied political development in the Middle East therefore has considerable force. But it also has its limits. While external powers have shaped the region's political institutions, it is overly deterministic to suggest that these have not also been influenced – to an equal or greater extent – by local actions, decisions and processes.

Politics and the state

This takes us logically to the fourth explanatory theory of the state of the Middle East: the nature of the region's politics and its political institutions. As has been noted already, there is a variety of different types of states in the Middle East – including democracies, monarchies and dominant, often avowedly secular, ruling parties. But despite the myriad differences within and between them, and at the risk of some generalisation, the region's states share a number of important common characteristics.

Rulers in the Middle East are mostly unaccountable to the people over whom they govern. State power was generally acquired through tribal conquest, military coup or revolution, sometimes with external support. That power is largely retained today through a combination of force, co-option, the distribution of economic benefits and the use of political ideology or religion.

This weak legitimacy of most Middle Eastern ruling elites has meant that they have invested heavily in policing, security and other coercive capacities, to counter threats to their position from within and without. Middle Eastern states are among the most militarised and security orientated in the world. To prevent the emergence of opposition forces, most Middle Eastern states have also engaged in widespread censorship of journalists and academics and the repression of independent political activity.

The distinction between the state and the ruling elite, and between the public and the private sector, is also very blurred in many countries in the Middle East. As a matter of course, state resources are expropriated for personal use by many of the region's rulers. It has been estimated that around one third of all state revenues in the Middle East are pocketed by the ruler and his close associates (Halliday, 2005b).

Most countries in the Middle East also have state and public administration systems that are overgrown and inefficient, much larger and more invasive than in other low or middle income countries, and comparable in some respects to the communist states prior to the collapse of the USSR (Henry and Springborg, 2004). But these large state bureaucracies have often proven to be ineffective in promoting economic modernisation and development. As in other parts of the world where political concerns consistently trump economic ones, development has suffered.

The view that bad politics and poor governance are at the root of the problems of the Middle East is now commonly asserted in the west. The US administration, European governments, the European Commission, the International Financial Institutions, and western think tanks are all now arguing – albeit with varying degrees of force or subtlety – that better governance and more accountable and transparent political institutions are the key to enhancing the prospects of the region's people.

But perhaps the most compelling argument for far-reaching political reform is that coming from within the region itself. The Arab Human Development Reports, written by a distinguished group of regional thinkers, have provided a devastating intellectual critique of the political status quo in the Middle East.[6] The reports have noted the 'existence of deeply rooted shortcomings in Arab institutional structures' and serious deficits in respect of freedom, the rights of women and the use and management of knowledge (UNDP, 2002). The 2004 Report, which was specifically focused on the issues of freedom and governance, condemns the lack of democracy in the region, the widespread use of repression and emergency laws, and abuses of human rights. It calls on Arab countries to rebuild their societies on the basis of full respect for human rights and human freedoms as cornerstones of good governance, the complete empowerment of women and the better use of knowledge: an essential precondition, they assert, for an 'Arab renaissance' (UNDP, 2004).

6. In recent years, there have been a number of other reform initiatives coming out of the region. These include the Declaration on the Process of Reform and Modernisation, issued by the Arab summit held in Tunis in May 2004, the Sana'a Declaration of January 2004, and the Alexandria Charter, approved by some Arab civil society organisations in March 2004.

The role of external actors

The Arab Human Development Reports are right to stress that it is the people of the region themselves who must take primary responsibility for reform in the Middle East. Better politics and better policy in the region are absolutely critical and this depends most of all on the decisions taken locally. But there are also important responsibilities that rest with external actors. While there is a range of external actors that impact on the economics, politics, culture and security of the region, in this paper the focus is on two particularly important external players: the United States and the European Union countries. The policy tools potentially available to these players include diplomacy, development assistance, trade policy, support for institution building and civil society, educational and cultural exchanges, as well as more robust policy tools like political and economic pressure, targeted sanctions and military force. There is clearly no 'one-size-fits-all' model of political reform. On the contrary, what are required are intelligent and targeted strategies towards particular countries, rooted in a sophisticated analysis of the specific country context. Support for political reform is morally right; it is also a common interest. Continuing political stagnation in the Middle East is likely to lead to further conflict, instability and extremism, regionally and globally.

Propositions for supporting political reform

The remainder of this paper focuses on six areas in which the US and the EU could potentially play a useful role in supporting political reform in the Middle East. In each of these areas the dominant US-led reform agenda is failing, although European strategies also have serious weaknesses. In each area the progressive political tradition ought to have something new and distinctive to say. Consideration of these six areas leads to six broad propositions:

1. Learn from Iraq
2. End support for authoritarianism
3. Promote economic justice
4. Support reformers and reform processes
5. Engage with Islamists
6. Prioritise Palestine.

In these areas, outlined below, specific policy recommendations are also highlighted, concrete steps that external actors could take that would make a difference to the prospects for political reform in the Middle East.

1. Learn from Iraq

No war in recent memory has been as controversial and divisive as the US and UK led war with Iraq in 2003. While many people were quick to decide whether military action was right or wrong, others – particularly those on the progressive wing of politics – wrestled for longer with the issues at stake. Saddam Hussein's human rights record was appalling and the removal of his regime from power is clearly a very welcome development. Before the war, one could certainly make a humanitarian case for intelligent and coherent international action to try to remove Saddam Hussein and to help support the emergence of a broad-based alternative government in Iraq.

But this case should have been balanced against the likely costs and consequences of military action, including the loss of life resulting from armed intervention, the radicalisation of Muslim and wider Islamic opinion that might result from this, the spur given to global terrorist movements, the danger that Iraq might disintegrate into civil strife, and the financial (and therefore the opportunity) costs of action. There were also critical issues about the legality of military action and the way in which any intervention might be carried out. Taken together, these factors should have indicated a need for caution, the serious exploration of all options, and the building of an international consensus before action was taken.

But the US administration did not allow any of these concerns to get in the way of a war it had been planning to wage for many years. It was supported in this by the UK Government. Initially, the US and the UK Governments argued that action should be taken not because of Saddam Hussein's human rights record, but rather because of his failure to comply with longstanding UN resolutions in relation to weapons of mass destruction. The 'threat' posed by Saddam Hussein was an argument made with particular force by Tony Blair. But George Bush also argued that changing the politics of Iraq could help change the wider politics of the Middle East. As he put it:

> 'A new regime in Iraq would serve as a dramatic and inspiring example of freedom for other nations in the region.' (Bush, 2003)

The 'threat' argument has been undermined by the failure since the end of the war to uncover any weapons of mass destruction, or even weapons programmes, in Iraq. Contrary to their claims before the war, it is now clear that the threat from Iraq was not so great or so immediate as to justify the premature curtailment of the UN weapons inspections process. According to most international legal opinion – and the view of no less a figure than the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan – military action against Iraq was also unlawful.

George Bush's argument that military intervention in Iraq would bring about the wider democratisation of the region lacks credibility too. Since the start of the war in March 2003, and during the two-and-a-half years of their occupation, the US administration has made a series of major policy blunders in Iraq. Many of these mistakes have derived from arrogance and from poor management of the occupying forces, including the abuses of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib. Other mistakes have resulted from a basic ignorance of Iraqi society or from weak strategic planning, including the decision to disband – almost overnight – the Iraqi armed forces, a decision that contributed to the breakdown of public order in Iraq and provided ample numbers of recruits for the insurgents.

While it is not the purpose of this paper to provide a detailed critique of the Iraq war and its aftermath, it is important to highlight three particular lessons that stand out from Iraq that have wider relevance for international reform strategies towards the Middle East.

First, Iraq shows that external military power has severe limits as an instrument of democratic change. It is much easier to bring down an existing despotic regime than to build up new democratic institutions. And what is true of Iraq is likely to be true in other parts of the region too. For instance, with the exception of a few ultra-conservatives in the US, there is now almost no one who thinks that a military attack on Iran would be an appropriate way of responding to very real concerns about Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions or of advancing political reform or human rights in that country. As the Iranian Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi has argued, a US-led military attack on Iran would be a disaster for the reform movement within the country (Ebadi, 2005). Dialogue and concerted political and economic pressure – of the kind promoted by Britain, France and Germany – is a more sensible policy option than the sabre-rattling that often comes out of Washington. If Iran refuses to co-operate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) over its nuclear activities, targeted sanctions may also need to be imposed.

What is true of Iran is also true of Syria. Firm pressure should be maintained on the regime in Damascus to comply with the UN investigation into the murder of the former Lebanese Prime Minister. But a US-led military attack on Syria would weaken, not strengthen, the prospects for beneficial change and could create the conditions for Syria's implosion (McCarthy, 2005).

Second, Iraq shows the critical importance of political legitimacy. However much most Iraqis detest Saddam Hussein, they generally resent the US or other external actors interfering in their affairs. As has been noted already, the US has particular problems of credibility as an advocate of reform in the Middle East. Getting the United Nations involved in overseeing the transition process in Iraq was a belated recognition of this on the part of the US. But the problem of legitimacy is a wider and more complex one. Wherever external powers are involved in reform processes they need to ensure that their actions are about facilitating the emergence of legitimate and representative local institutions, and allowing the diverse voices of civil society to be heard (Said, 2005).

There is a third lesson from Iraq, and that is the importance of new political arrangements delivering in practical terms. The concept of democracy is popular in Iraq, as confirmed by the participation of nearly 11 million Iraqis in the parliamentary elections in December 2005, a turnout of 70 per cent. But to properly consolidate democratic institutions there needs to be early and tangible progress on economic issues, as well as moves to re-establish basic security. One of the reasons for the unpopularity of the occupying forces has been that the period of occupation has coincided with the breakdown of law and order and the deterioration in the provision of some important services. In Iraq, and in other parts of the Middle East, support for political change will not be sustained if the governing institutions cannot provide for people's basic needs.

2. End support for authoritarianism

Beyond Iraq, the current debate about reform in the Middle East – in the US and also in Europe – has very

little to say about the contribution of the western powers to the problems afflicting the region. But one of the best things that could be done by the US and EU to support reform in the Middle East is to end their direct and indirect support for authoritarianism in the region. This paper has already highlighted the colonial legacy and the role of the US and to a lesser extent the Soviet Union during the Cold War period. But harmful external actions in the Middle East are not confined to the past. The US and many European states are still pursuing policies in the region that run counter to their newly professed commitments to human rights and democracy.

> 'The Middle East region is exceptional in that the Cold War's end has not signalled great power retreat from patronage of authoritarianism, as has been the case in Latin America, Africa and elsewhere. Playing on the West's multiple security concerns has allowed authoritarian regimes in the region to retain international support. The West's generous provision of this support has bolstered the capacity and will of these regimes to hold on.' (Bellin, 2005: 33)

This western support for Middle Eastern authoritarianism takes many forms. Following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, western intelligence agencies have established closer links with their counterparts in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia, as well as forging newer links with agencies in Algeria, Syria and Yemen. There are serious concerns about the practices of these agencies, not least the widespread use of torture. While the world of intelligence agencies is one mired in secrecy, the information available suggests that human rights are coming a very poor second to counter-terrorism objectives in terms of western priorities (Hawthorne, 2005).

There is also evidence that the US government has been prepared to send terrorist suspects to countries in the region, under the policy of extraordinary renditions, even when the country in question is known to regularly use torture (Mayer, 2005). It is hard to square such practices with calls for greater observance of human rights on the part of Middle Eastern states. On the contrary, the practice is an affront to the very concept of human rights. The perceived value to the US administration of extraordinary renditions is precisely that suspects can be interrogated more harshly than would be the case in a US court, and without the safeguards of national and international law. US policy is simply indefensible, and many European countries, including the UK, have been pusillanimous in failing to condemn the policy.

Many of the region's more repressive and authoritarian states also continue to be supported directly by substantial western financial and military assistance. Take the case of Egypt. Although contested presidential and parliamentary elections were held for the first time in September and November 2005, these were clearly rigged in favour of the incumbent, Hosni Mubarak, and the ruling New Democracy Party. Egypt has a poor record on human rights. The country's security forces routinely torture and mistreat detainees. Under emergency rule, in existence since 1981, large numbers of people are arbitrarily detained or taken for trials before military and state security courts (Human Rights Watch, 2005).

Despite this record, the US provides Egypt with US$1.3 billion in military assistance and US$600 million in economic assistance annually. Egypt is also strongly supported by the EU. The Association Agreement between Egypt and the European Union, signed in June 2001, came into force on June 1, 2004. Although the agreement is premised on 'respect for human rights and democratic principles', it is not clear to what extent the EU has raised these concerns with the Egyptians and to what effect.

Human rights violations are pervasive in Saudi Arabia too, including executions, arbitrary detention, mistreatment and torture of detainees, a ban on political parties and severe restrictions on freedom of expression. Women and girls face systematic discrimination. Despite recent tensions in their relationship, US support for Saudi Arabia remains strong. The UK and France also have strong military and diplomatic links with the Saudis. The UK, for example, continues to be a major supplier of military equipment to the country. Between 1999 and 2003, the reported value of UK military exports to Saudi Arabia was £595 million (Saferworld, 2005). The UK Government has recently supported a deal worth an estimated £8 billion to equip Saudi Arabia's armed forces with Typhoon Combat Aircraft. The nature of the Saudi political system and its record on human rights do not appear to have been raised at all in these negotiations.

The vigorous pursuit by the US and the EU of arms contracts with Middle Eastern regimes is a key explanation for why the region has the highest military expenditure in the developing world: seven per cent of national income, double that of Europe and Central Asia (DFID, 2003). Urged on by western arms salesmen, encouraged and financed by western governments, the Middle East represents a huge part of the

global market in military equipment. Just seven Middle Eastern countries – Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Algeria – alone accounted for 40 per cent of all global arms sales in 2000 (Bellin, 2005: 31). This relationship between western and Middle Eastern security establishments also contributes to the heavy militarisation of societies in the region and the high proportion of the population engaged in the state's security agencies. This military spending in the Middle East has generally worsened, not improved, regional security; it has strengthened the coercive apparatus of the state; and it has diverted public resources from other more pressing development priorities.

There are a number of ways in which the US and the EU can and should end their support for authoritarianism in the region. First, there needs to be a fundamental re-evaluation of the relationship between US and EU security services and their counterparts in the Middle East. While these agencies will continue to co-operate in addressing common threats, those posed by extremist Islamists for example, there should be an immediate end to the practice of extraordinary renditions. Sending terrorist suspects back to Middle Eastern countries that are known to practice torture reinforces rather than weakens repressive and authoritarian elements in those countries, as well as being morally indefensible. While limited changes to existing national laws in the US and the EU may sometimes be appropriate in dealing with the new threat posed by transnational terrorism, any new legal arrangements should be unambiguously consistent with international human rights and humanitarian law, including provisions relating to torture.

Second, the EU and the US should introduce much tighter controls governing arms or military transfers to the region. While countries in the Middle East have legitimate security needs, the US and the EU should not transfer equipment to the Middle East where this would be used for purposes of internal repression or external aggression, to fuel existing conflicts, to abuse human rights or where this would divert resources from more pressing development priorities. An International Arms Trade Treaty should be established, setting high common standards governing military transfers, and the EU and the US should then apply its provisions rigorously in respect of the Middle East and elsewhere.

Third, there needs to be a new approach to the provision of assistance to countries in the region. Support for political reform does not necessarily imply an end to all western financial support for regimes like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, but development resources do need to be used in very different ways. The next section suggests how resources to the region might be better used to promote economic justice. Section 4 suggests how resources might be better used to help support reformers and reform processes.

3. Promote economic justice

Progressives have always stressed that issues of political freedom cannot be divorced from questions of economic justice and development (Sen, 1999). This insight has particular relevance in the Middle East. Improving the economic prospects of the region is clearly important in its own terms. But what is the precise relationship between this and political reform? The link is a complex one, not least because the causality runs both ways – economic advance can facilitate better governance but also depends on it. However, there are strong reasons why progressives should seek to prioritise issues of economic development and economic justice as part of a strategy for supporting political reform in the region. Illiberal and extremist forces thrive in situations of economic marginalisation, poverty, unemployment and falling living standards. Broad-based economic development, job creation and action against poverty are certainly not a guarantee of political moderation and democratisation. But over the medium term at least, they can help create conditions in which these developments become more likely.

While some countries in the region have made economic progress in recent years, overall the Middle East is increasingly marginalised within the new global economy and it is doing much less well than previously comparable regions like Latin America and South East Asia (EIU, 2005). With only a few exceptions, this holds true for oil exporting as well as non-oil exporting countries. In some ways, the region's dependence on oil and the current high price of oil in international markets is a mixed blessing. While high oil prices encourage higher levels of economic growth, they also reduce the incentive for regional leaders to implement structural reforms and promote economic diversification (World Bank, 2005b).

The region's poor economic performance is reflected in a range of indicators. Average economic growth rates in the Middle East have been lower than the developing country average for the last decade. The region attracts a mere one per cent of foreign direct investment flows to developing countries. The region's manufactured exports to OECD countries are miniscule and inter-regional trade is also low, between eight and nine per cent of total exports over the last two decades as compared with 22 per cent in Asia and 25

per cent for Latin America (NATO, 2005).

The region's poor economic performance also translates into poor development outcomes and weak human development indicators in many Middle Eastern countries. Despite real improvements in some areas – a rise in life expectancy, a fall in mortality rates for children under the age of five, and a doubling of adult literacy in recent decades – significant numbers of the region's people are still living in poverty and lack access to adequate health, education and other services (UNDP, 2002). Since 1990 the percentage of people living on less than US$1 a day has remained constant, while those living on less than US$2 has increased from 21 to 23 per cent of the population and now number 68 million – 18 million more than in 1990 (DFID, 2003). 32 million people in the region are undernourished. The maternal mortality rate is double that of Latin America and the Caribbean, and four times that of East Asia. About 65 million adult Arabs are illiterate, two thirds of them women. And illiteracy rates are much higher than in much poorer countries. This problem is unlikely to disappear quickly. Ten million children under the age of 15 are not in school, and on current trends this figure will rise by 40 per cent over the next decade (UNDP, 2002).

The region also suffers from the low quality of education provided. This is true at all levels, from primary through to tertiary. These weaknesses of educational provision have major implications for the future development of the region. Education, skills and the use of knowledge are the commanding heights of the modern global economy and they are central to the viability of democratic and liberal politics. The region faces a huge employment crisis too, one compounded by rapid population growth. An estimated 100 million new jobs will be needed over the next 20 years to keep pace with new labour force entrants and to absorb the current unemployed (World Bank, 2005b).

Most of the changes that are required in order to better address these development challenges will have to be made by the governments and people of the Middle East. This is the central argument of the UNDP Arab Human Development Reports and of international institutions like the World Bank. The Bank has suggested that the structural economic reform that the region's leaders need to carry out has three fundamental and related components:

> 'Firstly, from closed to more open economies, to create more competitive industries, benefit from international best practice, and gain access to new technology; secondly, from public sector dominated to private sector led economies, providing the basis for improved efficiency and expansion of employment; and thirdly, from oil dominated to more diversified economies, to reduce the region's dependence on volatile sources of growth.' (World Bank, 2005b)

Actions in these areas obviously need to be complemented and reinforced by better governance, investment in human capital, action to address conflict and instability, and measures to create a more favourable investment climate for business. But while the lead on all these issues must be a local one, emphasis should also be placed on the roles and responsibilities of external actors like the US and the EU in promoting economic development in the region, including through their policies on aid and trade.

On aid, the issue is much less about aid *quantity* (the region already receives substantially more aid per capita than sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia) and much more about the *quality* of aid and ensuring a more coherent policy on the part of donors. Much of the existing international aid to the region has a weak developmental impact, focused as it is on meeting donors' domestic political concerns on issues like migration and terrorism. These priorities need to shift, so that development resources are spent on strengthening the capacity of Middle Eastern countries to secure pro-poor growth, enhancing the quality of institutions, governance and public services, and on policies to strengthen human rights, particularly the rights of women and minority communities.

On trade, many of the biggest obstacles are those that Middle Eastern states erect between themselves. This includes tariff and non-tariff barriers, and high transport, logistics and communication costs, which raise the costs of trade. Exchange rate management has also played a role in discouraging non-oil exports, with currency overvaluation hurting competitiveness (World Bank, 2005b).

Some steps have been taken to address this and to foster more trade. In recent years, bilateral and regional trade accords have proliferated in the Middle East. Many of these agreements have been with Europe through the Euro-Mediterranean process and, more recently, EU Association Agreements on preferential trade access. Agreements are currently in force in Jordan, Egypt, Algeria, Lebanon, West Bank and Gaza, Tunisia and Morocco, with an agreement signed by Syria in 2004. Regional initiatives like the Pan-Arab Free Trade Agreement (PAFTA) and the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) customs union have the

purported aim of stimulating more trade. A number of countries are seeking membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO); Jordan and the US have signed a free trade agreement, and more such agreements may be forthcoming. To date, however, the impact of these agreements has been very limited. The PAFTA, for example, was drawn up to focus only on the trade in goods, excluding services and investment and the potential benefits that could flow from greater trade in these sectors (World Bank, 2005b).

Other obstacles result from the rules of international trade and from the policies of developed countries, including the US and the EU. The end of the WTO Multi-Fibre Agreement (MFA) in January 2005 will increase competition for textile exporters like Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt, with potentially negative implications for export revenues and employment. The European Union also imposes significant barriers to Middle Eastern exports in relation to agricultural commodities and petrochemical products (Springborg, 2005). Fostering greater trade by Middle Eastern states depends, at least in part, on a reduction in these trade barriers. Pressure should be mounted for fairer terms of trade for Middle Eastern countries. The US and the EU should also be urged to do more to increase temporary migration flows from the region (which could increase resource transfers to the region through remittances) and provide funding to Middle Eastern countries to assist them with managing the transition costs of trade liberalisation (World Bank, 2005c).

4. Support reformers and reform processes

Advocates of political reform in the Middle East, particularly in Washington, often seek to draw parallels with the situation in parts of Eastern Europe in 1989, when repressive regimes were overthrown by popular democratic movements that went on to quickly establish liberal democracies. But this analogy is largely a false one. The critical difference between the two regions, between then and now, is the relative weakness of the constituency for democratic reform in many Middle Eastern states (Salamé, 2001). Of course, there are individuals and groups working for democratic change across the region and their numbers and influence are growing. There are also increasingly politicised Islamist groups that constitute a focal point for opposition to many existing regimes. What is lacking, however, is:

> '…a supply of broad-based political organisations pushing for democracy – political parties, social movements, labour unions, large civic organisations … Until the governments face stronger pressure from organised citizens, they will not take steps to truly curb the power of the executive by strengthening checks and balances and allowing unfettered political participation.' (Carothers and Ottaway, 2005: 151).

It is the people of the Middle East themselves who will obviously have to build these broad-based organisations if change is to happen. They face many obstacles in doing so, including the tendency of local ruling elites to repress those who represent a serious political challenge. As in other parts of the world, a protracted, probably messy process of political struggle will be required to overcome this – and the role of external actors will generally be secondary to that of people in the region. But there are nevertheless various ways in which external actors like the US and EU could help build constituencies for reform in the Middle East. There are four ways in particular that should be highlighted.

First, the EU and US can and should provide direct practical and financial support to reformers: that is to liberals, democrats, human rights organisations, women's groups, trade unions, progressive business associations and other parts of civil society in the Middle East. While at present these groups may lack significant popular following, they have an important role to play in articulating and advancing a reform agenda. This assistance clearly needs to be provided sensitively. Authentic civil society organisations can be easily undermined by the charge that they are being financed by the west simply to promote a western agenda in the region. The US and the EU should also engage with moderate Islamist groups – a subject addressed in detail in the next section.

Second, the EU and US should support diverse and free media in the Middle East, and better access to new information and communications technologies (ICTs). In no other region is information more tightly controlled. Just 53 newspapers are published per 1000 people across the Middle East, compared to an average of 285 per 1000 in the rest of the world (UNDP 2002). And most of these papers are heavily censored. Governments in the region also seek to control satellite channels, although with less success. For example, millions now watch the Arabic satellite TV station Al-Jazeera (Saghieh, 2004). If accurate, the recent suggestion that the Bush administration planned a military strike against the headquarters of Al-Jazeera is outrageous.

Far from seeking to curb free expression, the US and the EU should be using their influence and resources to try to promote greater media pluralism and access to ICTs, as an important driver of change in the region. Better access to information can help to strengthen opposition forces, emboldening them to challenge existing rulers and equipping them to put forward alternatives to the status quo. The UK Government, to its credit, has just agreed to fund a new Arabic Television Channel, as part of the programming of the BBC World Service, due to come into operation in 2007. This could play a useful role in encouraging a more informed political debate across the region.

Third, the EU and US should try to create clear incentives for the region's leaders to undertake political reform. The experience of political change in other parts of the world suggests that countries can be persuaded to undertake very significant political and economic reforms if this is part of a process that yields real benefits to the ruling elite and the wider society (PMSU, 2005). The way in which the prospect of EU membership has been used to bring about far-reaching change in eastern and central Europe is a good example of this. The process of Turkey's accession to the EU can be seen in a similar vein.

A critical question is whether such a process might be used more broadly to stimulate political reform in the region. While EU membership for the Middle Eastern states is not on the agenda, the relationship between the Middle East and the EU could be much better used to create incentives for reform. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (commonly known as the Barcelona Process) was started in 1995 and was reviewed at the Barcelona plus 10 Conference in November 2005. An aid, trade and political agreement between the EU and some of the states of the Middle East, the Barcelona Process enshrined a commitment to fostering political pluralism. But 10 years on, progress on political reform has been very limited. By common consent, the outcome of the plus 10 meeting was a big disappointment.

One of the specific failings of Barcelona has been the assumption that there is an easy and sequential link between economic and political reform. There are links between the two, but economic reform does not necessarily or automatically deliver political reform. This will require a more open and focused EU dialogue with the region's governments about good governance, democracy and human rights, as well as support for those elements of civil society that can be drivers of change in the medium term. In many ways, the EU is much better placed than the US to play this role, and it has more to offer the region in terms of economic co-operation, development assistance and trade access as potential 'carrots' to help leverage political change (EuroMeSCo, 2005).

A revised Barcelona Process also needs to run in parallel with the new European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The ENP was originally conceived as an initiative focused on the countries to the east of the European Union. However, it has now been extended to the southern Mediterranean states. While stated EU policy is that the ENP will reinforce the Barcelona Process, there is a lively and ongoing debate about the precise relationship between the two initiatives (Youngs and Fernandez, 2005).

The Neighbourhood Policy certainly introduces two elements that are missing from Barcelona: a stronger emphasis on bilateral relations and the concept of 'positive differentiation'. Both would allow the EU to reward countries that move faster with political reform. Another difference between the ENP and Barcelona is that the former would provide participating states with a concrete stake in the institutions of the EU, in particular the single market, providing a further potential incentive for reform (Ferrero-Waldner, 2005). These benefits would be linked to progress by participating states against reform benchmarks set out in bilateral action plans agreed with the EU. It is important that this opportunity be carefully managed to help incentivise reform among participating Middle Eastern states.

Fourth, alongside these new incentives for reform, the European Union and the US should be prepared, where appropriate, to press more forcefully for political change in the Middle East. Sceptics will argue that this is what they already do and that such pressure has produced very little by way of tangible progress. No one would suggest that progress will be easy or straightforward and pressure should always be applied intelligently and with a good understanding of the national context, including its impact on internal power struggles and reform dynamics. But it is simply not true to say that western policy towards the region has been driven by a strong commitment to political reform. For the US, security concerns and access to oil have consistently taken precedence over concerns about human rights and political freedom in the region (Aburish, 1997). And many European states have been as unwilling as the US to apply real pressure for political reform in the Middle East (Youngs, 2005).

This is beginning to change. Individual European countries – in particular the UK, Germany, Holland,

Denmark and Sweden – have strengthened their national programmes in support of political reform in the region. But there is considerably more that can and should be done. Pressure may be particularly appropriate when dealing with governments that are backsliding from previous movements towards democratic opening. In cases like these, progressives should urge the EU and the US to exert more sustained pressure on the region's governments to allow greater political contestation and to encourage the sharing of political power (Carothers and Ottaway, 2005). Other priorities for EU and US pressure on Middle Eastern states might include press and media freedom, the legalisation of political parties and other civic associations, a greater oversight role for parliaments, the rule of law (including respect for judicial independence) and reforms to the police and security services. Progress in all these areas can help to weaken existing authoritarian structures in the region and to strengthen independent centres of political power.

5. Engage with Islamists

One of the prime motivations for supporting reform in the Middle East, as articulated by the US administration and European governments, is the perceived link between the region's stagnating political systems and radical Islam, including anti-western Islamic terrorism. While the links between the region's politics and global terrorism are complex, the two are not unconnected. Fifteen of the 19 hijackers involved in the attacks on the US on 11 September 2001 came from Saudi Arabia, one of the most closed and repressive regimes in the Middle East. However, if we are to better combat this threat it is important to properly account for the rise of extremist, fundamentalist or violent versions of Islam. Much of the dominant reform debate, particularly in the US, talks as if this phenomenon came out of nowhere. Again there is an important role for progressives in providing historical context, not least highlighting the role that western powers have played, inadvertently or otherwise, in the growth of extreme Islamist movements (Burke, 2003).

While extremist Islam predates the modern period, it has come increasingly to the fore over the last four decades. From the creation of the modern Middle East system at the end of World War I to the 1960s, the dominant ideology in the region was pan-Arab nationalism. This ideology was forged in opposition to European colonialism in the 1920s and '30s. It was given a powerful impetus by the loss of Palestine in 1948 and reached its peak in the 1950s under Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt. His aim was a unified Arab world freed from European rule and foreign interference. Despite his initial popularity, among the Arab as well as the Egyptian masses, Nasser and the ideology he championed failed to make progress. The idea of Arab unity was not supported by most existing states in the region – with leaders jealous to preserve the prerogatives of national sovereignty – and secular Arab nationalism was increasingly seen to have failed to deliver the prosperity and human emancipation it promised.

The Arabs' catastrophic defeat at the hands of Israel in the 1967 war – with the Israelis seizing large parts of Arab territory – confirmed to many people the bankruptcy of the Arab nationalist project, and increased the appeal of those espousing religious rather than secular solutions to the problems of the region. The resurgence of radical Islam has its roots in this sense of profound Arab humiliation and in socio-economic discontent.

From the 1970s onwards, Islamist movements were also supported selectively by some pro-American states in the region as a way of countering the appeal of the communists and other left-wing groups. They judged – erroneously as it turns out – that the Islamists would be a socially conservative force. For example, the Israelis fostered Islamist groups as a way of undermining the Palestinian nationalist movement, while in Egypt, Nasser's successor Anwar Sadat released Muslim Brotherhood activists from prison and allowed religious groups to organise on university campuses to counter the socialists and communists. This tactical ploy ended in disaster for Sadat. He was assassinated by Islamists in 1981, following his peace agreement with Israel.

But the biggest supporters of Islamist groups were the Saudis, particularly after the oil price boom of the 1970s. Saudi Arabia invested huge sums in backing Islamists groups across the world. The Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 gave the Saudis a powerful additional rationale for this policy. The 1980s were to be characterised by a power struggle between the Saudi monarchy and Khomeini's Iran for influence and control over the growing international Islamic movement (Kepel, 2004). To strengthen their standing in the region and in the wider Islamic world, to counter the influence of Khomenei, and to prevent the possibility of a revolution at home, the Saudis encouraged and financed large numbers of young Arab men to go to Afghanistan to fight against the Soviet occupiers following the invasion of 1979.

This cadre of young fighters was also strongly supported by the US, the UK and Pakistan. The US in particular provided massive military assistance to these anti-Soviet Islamic forces. It must bear very heavy responsibility, therefore, for the subsequent emergence of the Mujahideen regime in Afghanistan, the precursors of the Taliban and Al Qaeda. At the end of the war with Afghanistan in 1989, the tens of thousands of young men who went there from the Middle East were suddenly available to serve extremist Islamic causes elsewhere in the world, including acts of terrorism against Arab regimes and western targets (Ruthven, 2004).

Islamist movements were also affected significantly by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The invasion, and the threat that Iraq would go on to take Saudi Arabia, forced the Saudi elite to seek military protection from the US. The conflict opened up huge divisions across the Arab world. Although his regime was avowedly secular, Saddam Hussein exploited the Saudis' reliance on western 'infidel' soldiers and accused the Saudi elite of sullying the sacred birthplace of the Muslim faith. It was an argument that was to be used repeatedly over the next decade, including by Osama bin Laden, as a justification for overthrowing the Saudi regime.

As we will see, the extremist Islamist movements – however dangerous – never succeeded in winning over mainstream opinion in the Arab world. That is still the case in 2006, although the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the subsequent occupation of the country, has radicalised Islamist opinion across the region and acted as a powerful magnet for extremists. Islamist extremists, in the Middle East and elsewhere, have also invoked the war with Iraq as a justification for terrorist atrocities across the world, including in London in July 2005.

Media and political attention focuses disproportionately, if understandably, on the violent extremists. However, there is a critical role for progressives in drawing attention to the very real diversity and popularity of Islamist groups in the Middle East, the extent to which Islamists constitute the main bulk of the opposition to existing regimes, and the need, therefore, to engage with political Islamists as part of a strategy for supporting reform processes in the region.

One of the explanations for the popularity of Islamist groups in the Middle East has been their role in the provision of welfare services. While official state-provided services are often of very poor quality or riddled with inefficiency, Islamist movements are active across the region in providing shelter, education, medical care, housing, and legal and financial assistance. In contrast with many state service providers, the leaders of Islamist organisations tend to lead less ostentatious lifestyles and to be much less prone to corruption.

Islamist groups in the Middle East are enormously diverse in their views. In today's Middle East and more broadly in the Islamic world,

> 'Islamists cover a wide spectrum: radical and moderate, violent and peaceful, traditional and modern, democratic and anti-democratic … and the moderate side of the spectrum vastly outweighs the more dangerous, violent and radical segment.' (Fuller, 2005: 38)

For example, in Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait and Yemen, Islamist groups have adopted more moderate and pragmatic positions, after decades of failed opposition to existing regimes. Their moderation involves a formal rejection of violence to secure their political ends, support for the rule of law, and an acceptance of pluralistic politics. Because Islamist groups are often the primary victims of human rights violations in their own countries, they are also increasingly vocal in calling for better safeguards for human rights across the Middle East.

In some cases, these positions are relatively new. This raises a legitimate concern in some quarters that this new found interest in democracy is a cynical ploy rather than a genuine conversion: that were the Islamists to come to power through democratic means they would then tear up these institutions and rule through violence and repression. Those who advocate engagement with Islamist groups should not dismiss this concern out of hand, but neither should this argument be over-stated, or used to block constructive dialogue. In all cases, groups should be judged by what they do as well as what they say. However, there is real evidence that many Islamist groups have changed their approach in recent years. As a result, it is important to establish a deeper dialogue and process of engagement with them (Hamzawy, 2005, International Crisis Group, 2005b, El-Din Shahin, 2005).

Nor does engaging with Islam imply that the positions taken by Islamist groups – even the moderate ones – are not open to criticism. For example, some Islamist groups have attitudes or policies towards women

that run counter to universal principles of equality and non-discrimination. There are also concerns about the stance of some Islamist groups in respect of freedom of expression. In countries like Kuwait and Egypt, Islamist groups have actively sought to limit intellectual freedom, instituting legal proceedings against any writings on Islam they disagree with, seeking to ban books of which they disapprove, and persecuting those who write them. These policies should clearly be opposed in the strongest possible terms.

The argument is rather about the best means to encourage progressive political change in the Middle East. To date, the US and the EU have avoided working with the Islamists, even on fairly apolitical issues. In the words of one regional analyst: 'Islamists continue to be the great untouchables of the democracy assistance world' (Youngs, 2005). But the repression of Islamists by existing rulers and the ostracism of them by international actors has been a singularly ineffective strategy (Fuller, 2004, Hamzawy, 2005). A new approach is needed. Political change in the region is dependent on the emergence of broad-based constituencies for reform. Given their roots in the social and cultural fabric of Arab countries, moderate Islamist movements are likely to be indispensable to this (Fuller, 2003).

In proposing engagement with Islamists a distinction should also be drawn between support and dialogue. Those groups that renounce violence and commit to democratic politics should be potential recipients of practical support. Such support should certainly not be provided to more radical Islamist groups like Hizbollah or Hamas. But there is at least an argument about whether the US and the EU should enter into formal talks with such groups. Hizbollah has been fielding candidates in Lebanon's elections since 1992 and has established a significant presence on the Lebanese political scene (Cobban, 2005). Hamas participated in the Palestinian municipal elections in 2005 and has strong support in Gaza and the West Bank. While its violent methods are indefensible, a willingness to engage Hamas in dialogue may be required in order to advance the cause of peace between Israel and the Palestinians and break the relentless cycle of violence.

The extent to which the current policies of the US and the EU may actually strengthen the hand of Islamic extremists, particularly in the context of a US-led 'war on terror', should also be highlighted. As the International Crisis Group correctly observes:

> 'By adopting a sledge-hammer approach which refuses to differentiate between modernist and fundamentalist varieties of Islamism, American and European policy-makers risk provoking one of two equally undesirable outcomes: either inducing the different strands of Islamic activism to band together in reaction, attenuating differences that might otherwise be fruitfully developed, or causing the non-violent and modernist tendencies to be eclipsed by the jihadis.' (International Crisis Group, 2005b)

A better understanding of the complex phenomenon of political Islamism – and a willingness by the EU, US and others to engage with its moderate elements – holds out the best prospects for political reform and the avoidance of further political and religious radicalisation.

6. Prioritise Palestine

While it is true that many Arab regimes use the Palestinian cause to divert attention from their own failings, progressives should point out that no issue in the Middle East does more to inflame popular opinion that the continuing occupation of Palestinian land by the Israelis. Any external reform initiative for the Middle East that is not accompanied by a serious attempt to promote a resolution of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict is therefore most unlikely to succeed.

But despite the critical importance of this issue, the chances of making progress in resolving the conflict look slim, at least in the short term. The cautious optimism of the early 1990s – symbolised by the historic handshake between Yitshak Rabin and Yasser Arafat on the White House lawn in 1993 – has been replaced by a sense of deep pessimism and uncertainty. The sudden departure of Ariel Sharon from the Israeli political scene in January 2006 adds hugely to that uncertainty. We will assess the possible implications of this later in this section. But it is important first to set the current situation in its recent historical context.

The Oslo Accords of the 1990s were a serious attempt to produce a lasting solution. They led to the establishment of a Palestinian Authority in Gaza and parts of the West Bank and the normalisation of relations between Israel and most of the Arab states. But ultimately the Accords failed to produce a breakthrough. There were many reasons for this. The Accords themselves were unbalanced or deliberately vague in important areas and this became a source of dispute between Israel and the Palestinians. Many of the most intractable issues, for example Jerusalem, settlements, water and refugees, were deferred pending

a final agreement. While progress in these areas was absolutely critical for the Palestinians, the Israelis were not bound by the Accords to make any compromises on these matters and were not inclined to do so.

The opportunity for peace was also squandered by failures of leadership and by the growth of extremism on all sides. The assassination of Rabin in 1995, at the hands of an Israeli fanatic, and a spate of bus bombings in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv carried out by Hamas, dealt a serious blow to the process. Rabin's successor, Shimon Peres, sought to counter these attacks, including by the extra-judicial killing of Yahya Ayyash, a key figure in Hamas. This action triggered a further spate of bus bombings against Israeli civilians. Peres also launched a major offensive in south Lebanon, Operation Grapes of Wrath, in an attempt to deal with the Hizbollah militias based there. The human cost of this intervention, with significant civilian casualties, contributed to Peres' defeat at the subsequent general election. His successor, Binyamin Netanyahu, had been an opponent of the Oslo Accords and he showed no real interest in reaching any compromise with the Palestinians.

On the other side, the new Palestinian Administration (PA) quickly became deeply authoritarian and corrupt, with many of its leaders more interested in personal enrichment than national liberation. The PA employed around 70,000 intelligence and security personnel, which repressed those who dared to criticise Arafat's strategy or expose corruption.

The defeat of Benyamin Netanyahu of Likud at the Israeli election in May 1999, and the election of Labour's Ehud Barak on a peace ticket, raised new hopes for progress. Under Barak, Israel and the Palestinians held serious and substantive negotiations. While these were ultimately unsuccessful, the two sides made greater progress towards peace than ever before.

The final stages of these negotiations involved Yasser Arafat, Ehud Barak and Bill Clinton in detailed talks at the latter's Camp David retreat. Explanations for why these talks failed differ markedly and many of the specific details of the negotiations remain deeply contested. Barak and Clinton both blamed Arafat's intransigence. They claimed that he was offered withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and almost all of the West Bank, the chance for tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees to come to Israel each year in the guise of family reunification, and the transfer of most of East Jerusalem to the Palestinians. This, they said, was the best deal that the Palestinians had ever been offered. While this may well be true, it is not the same as saying that the deal was one that Palestinian leaders were able or prepared to sell to their people. For many Palestinians, what was on offer amounted to annexation of their best lands by the Israelis, a patchwork state of disjointed Bantustans, the perpetuation of Israeli control over East Jerusalem, and the return of a tiny number of Palestinian refugees.

The start of the second Palestinian intifada later that year initiated yet another chapter in Israeli/Palestinian relations. The Israelis accuse Arafat of deliberately instigating the uprising. The Palestinians blame Ariel Sharon, the then leader of Israel's opposition Likud Party, for staging an intentionally provocative trip to the Al-Aqsa mosque compound in September 2000. (The site of the Al Aqsa mosque and its compound, known as Temple Mount to Jews and Haram al Sharif to Muslims, is sacred to both religions.) Sharon's trip is seen by many as lighting the fuse for a renewed, far more deadly, outbreak of violence. While the first intifada was fought largely with stones, the second became symbolised by the suicide bomber. In this deteriorating climate, Ariel Sharon was elected Prime Minister in 2001.

In many ways, Sharon continued the policy begun by Netanyahu. Under his premiership, Israel has effectively destroyed the infrastructure of the Palestinian Authority, including the Palestinian headquarters and the international airport in Gaza. Over the last few years, the Israelis have undertaken a series of large-scale incursions into densely-populated Palestinian areas, as well as targeted assassinations and house demolitions. The Israeli occupation has contributed to a serious deterioration in the economic situation in the Palestinian territories, with over 60 per cent of Palestinians now living below the poverty line (UNCTAD, 2005). The occupation has also inflicted a heavy toll in terms of Palestinian deaths and injuries. In addition, and in a very worrying development, the Israelis have built a 'separation barrier' or wall, which appears to be designed to capture some 80 per cent of the Jewish population now living in illegal West Bank settlements. In 2004, this barrier was said to be a violation of international humanitarian law by the International Court of Justice. The Israeli Supreme Court has also issued critical judgments on the barrier.

The combined Israeli and Palestinian casualty figures over this period are horrendous. Since September 2000, over 3000 Palestinians and around 1000 Israelis have been killed, and more than 34,000 Palestinians

and 6000 Israelis injured. Most of those killed or injured have been civilians (Human Rights Watch, 2005).

The Bush administration has generally shown huge sympathy for Israel, accepting the Israeli argument that they face a threat of terrorism from the Palestinians that is comparable to that which the US and the west face from Al-Qaeda, and one that should be countered in similar terms. By contrast, the administration has displayed limited willingness or ability to advance Palestinian interests. This is despite the fact that the US is now formally committed to supporting the establishment of a Palestinian state. In April 2003, the 'Road Map to a permanent two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict', was agreed by the US, the European Union, the United Nations and Russia (the Quartet). Among other things, this called for an end to the Israeli occupation that began in 1967 and for the terms of a final settlement to be negotiated between the two parties.

The death of Yasser Arafat in 2004 and the election of Mahmoud Abbas appeared to create new opportunities for making progress on the Road Map. But these opportunities have not been taken up and the US is failing to act as a genuinely honest broker between the two sides. Other members of the Quartet, particularly the EU, have profound concerns about the recent turn of events. Until fairly recently, these concerns do not appear to have translated into concrete measures to further the peace process. However, this is changing. The EU is now beginning to play a more important role, through its involvement in the opening of the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt, the upgrading of the Palestinian internal security forces and the facilitation of trade relations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

Over the last six months, Israeli/Palestinian relations have entered yet another new phase, with the unilateral Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip in August 2005. Ariel Sharon was the architect of that policy, and he had the political weight to force it through in the face of fierce opposition from prominent members of Likud and the Israeli settler movement. It was always very unclear whether Sharon was planning further disengagement from the West Bank after the Israeli elections in March (elections that he and his new party Kadima were predicted to win). The optimistic scenario is that Sharon would have sought substantial Israeli disengagement from the West Bank, creating the conditions for the emergence of a viable Palestinian state – something that he had spent most of his life fighting against. However, it is probably much more realistic to think that Sharon would have used his withdrawal from Gaza to try to impose a final, extremely unjust, settlement on the Palestinians. That would have included annexation of the major settlement blocks in the West Bank and no compromise over Jerusalem or refugees. It is extremely questionable whether a Palestinian state that emerged from such a process would be genuinely viable or that this would bring an end to violence and conflict between the two sides.

While Sharon's departure from the Israeli political scene makes discussion of his intended plans hypothetical, the questions and issues remain critical, and they are the same questions and issues that will confront whoever wins the Israeli elections in March. Comparable challenges face the Palestinians. Their Legislative elections in late January are a vital test. Can the ruling Fatah movement avoid fragmentation and sectarian infighting? How well will Hamas do? And can a post-elections Palestinian leadership acquire the legitimacy and authority to restore order in Gaza and to advance Palestinian interests in negotiations with the Israelis?

Given this enormously difficult context, it would be naïve to imagine that external actors can simply impose a settlement on the region. But there are things that the US and the EU can do to improve the chances for Israeli/Palestinian peace.

First, both sides should be encouraged and pressured to fully adhere to their obligations under the Road Map and international law. That includes commitment to a negotiated (as opposed to a dictated) settlement, the 'need to avoid unilateral actions that prejudice final status issues', and action to curb violence and terror. This should mean serious international pressure on Israel to end its illegal settlement activity, its ongoing confiscation of Palestinian land in and around Jerusalem, and halting the building of the separation barrier, actions that are a clear violation of the Road Map and international law. Pressure also needs to be brought to bear on the Palestinians to reform the Palestinian Authority, especially its security institutions, and to rein in extremist groups.

Second, there needs to be a more determined international effort to address the desperate economic situation facing the Palestinians. This humanitarian situation has been very considerably worsened as a result of Israeli policies of incursions, closures and curfews. These policies will need to change dramatically

if the economic circumstances in the Palestinian territories are to significantly improve. But international assistance also has a role to play. Former World Bank President Jim Wolfensohn is the Quartet's new Special Envoy, and he is overseeing a Quick Impact Economic Programme. It is important that this Programme be properly resourced and supported, and that a political, security and governance context be created in which economic development becomes possible.

Third, and most controversially, an international security presence on the borders following Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank should be argued for (Bar-Yaacov, 2003). Israel has already accepted EU involvement in the monitoring of the Rafah Border crossing between Israel and Egypt. The question is whether such external involvement can and should be scaled up. The Palestinians would almost certainly support a robust international security presence if it led to an ending of Israeli occupation and the establishment of a viable Palestinian state. But Israeli public opinion might also be persuaded to support a more thoroughgoing withdrawal from the Occupied Territories if it could be provided with a sufficiently strong security guarantee that the vacated territory would not be used as a base from which to launch attacks on Israel. The details of such an international security presence should be negotiated between the two sides, but the idea should be actively promoted by the Quartet.

Conclusion

There are no quick fixes when it comes to political reform and democratisation in the Middle East. As in other parts of the world, change will be a difficult process. The key decisions will be those taken by the people of the Middle East themselves. No amount of external pressure or encouragement will make much difference if the demand for reform is not coming from within and is not supported by broad-based movements for change. But for good and for ill, external actors can impact on the prospects for political reform and democracy across the region. This paper has already argued that there are moral and prudential reasons why the US and the EU, among other international players, should have an interest in supporting the development of more open and accountable political institutions in the Middle East and greater respect for human rights.

It is ironic, to say the least, that a right-wing US President should today be the most vocal global advocate for democratic change in the Middle East. But the neo-Conservative reform agenda in the Middle East is clearly failing, and not only in Iraq. Progressives need to recapture the language of democracy and freedom, champion this cause in the Middle East and elsewhere, and set out a clear agenda for supporting reform processes in the Middle East.

For the reasons already advanced in this paper, a strategy for political reform in the Middle East should, among other things:

- involve learning from the mistakes of Iraq;
- end support for authoritarianism;
- promote economic justice;
- support reformers and reform processes;
- engage with Islamists; and
- give renewed urgency to the search for a lasting resolution of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

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