

# Remarks on External Factors in Democratic Transition<sup>(1)</sup>

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Although this article generally acknowledges the priority of internal factors, it discusses the conditions for bringing back the external factor in certain cases, especially after the collapse of a despotic regime in a dependent state. The article discusses American foreign policy, refuting the thesis that the US became a supporter of democratic transformation after the Cold War, and makes the point that the “democratic realism” that guided American policy in the Middle East is a continuation of Cold War policies with new enemies.

International and regional external factors impeding democratic transformation in an Arab country are less prevalent if the country is less important in geostrategic terms, especially concerning the Arab Israeli conflict and oil production. This is one of the most important differences between the Egyptian and Tunisian experiences.

Democratic Transition   Democratic Wave   Consolidating Democracy   US Foreign Policy

It goes without saying that the results of the operation of the external factor – in the sense of the influence of other states, their policies and their relations with the state in question on democratic transformation – cannot be understood in isolation from internal factors. It is these internal factors that determine the extent of its effect, even if they do not control its direction. Researchers investigating such transitions should test the extent to which the external factor becomes a deciding factor, an impediment, or a support to this process.

There is a major difference between the role of external factors in the transition process itself and their role in consolidating democracy after transition. In extreme cases it may be regional developments that light the spark of revolution against a despotic regime, or that stymie transition through direct intervention. This is different from the role that international factors play in the consolidation and sustainability of a democratic transition in a country, which may be impeded by embargo or provided with outside support. Influential states or international organisations such as the World Bank, for example, may choose not to resist the fall of a despotic regime, but then subsequently refuse to provide the necessary financial assistance or economic, technical or political

support in matters crucial to the fate of democratic transformation: security sector reform, regulation of civilian-military relations (Egypt, Tunisia), or even disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of militia forces (Libya, Yemen). This withholding of support comes in a transition period in which it is only natural that general stability, state institutions’ performance and economic growth will all suffer, which can lead to a decline in support for democracy, and the rise of movements expressing nostalgia for dictatorship. Such movements can in turn be easily exploited by local and regional forces as happened in Egypt during the 2011 - 2013 transitional period. Equally, influential states and organizations may not be keen on the fall of an authoritarian regime and the transformation process itself, but may support the democratic government financially with assistance, loans, and investments for fear of instability - as is happening now between the EU and Tunisia.

There are external factors that have had a structural effect on the economy and society, for which it is no longer useful to treat as *external* factors when the transition process itself occurs. Take for example the economic dependency resulting from the relationship of the developed global industrial centre with the

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states of the south and the role it plays in preventing the development of a productive local-national bourgeoisie. This is an exceedingly important factor, and may be decisive in preventing the emergence of a civil society based on relations of free exchange and the centralisation of political and economic power in the hands of limited social demographics – whether bureaucratic or military – in whose orbit an unproductive crony capitalism revolves. Its historical roots in the interaction of ‘internal’ and ‘external’ notwithstanding, can this socioeconomic complex really be treated as an ‘external factor’ during a transition process? Of course not: it has become an internal reality *par excellence*. The same applies to the scars left by colonialism on the structure of state, economy and society, even if they are reproduced today between developed economies and the global economic periphery through unequal commercial relations, debts and arms deals. These structural factors produced by economic dependency do not only influence the form taken by dictatorship, but re-impose themselves when studying the sustainability of democracy and the opportunities it has for success after transition.

Despite the importance of cultural and intellectual influences, they too do not constitute ‘external factors’ in the sense meant in this kind of study: such studies are generally given to focusing on external political factors with an immediate effect, i.e. during the transitional period. Cultural interactions, the spread of democratic ideas, the attractiveness and absorption of democracy far from the complications of its reality are in my view very important factors. These factors can no longer be isolated from either popular or elite culture; in culture as in the economy, it is no longer possible to isolate the local from the imported. This applies in particular to Arab-Arab cultural interaction, which takes place through innumerable channels: Arab media, organisations, political parties and institutions active on the regional level, communications, literature and art. These all form part of the existing political, economic, cultural and social background of the state in which

democratic transformation takes place, and all also influence that transformation. They should thus be taken into consideration when studying the conditions of democratic transition in a given country.

To study democratic transition is to consider a process made up of two parts: 1) the end of authoritarian rule, whether by its collapse after top-down reform that splits the regime or after a military coup,<sup>(3)</sup> or a popular upheaval that forces the symbols of the regime to leave government, or both; and 2) the emergence of a pluralist political system by consent (preferably negotiated according to transitions studies, so-called transitology) of the political elites participating in it regardless of how mature the democratic system that initially emerges is, and the extent to which there is agreement on its principles. In this context, the direct and immediate role of external political factors is of interest to us insofar as it influences these two great and interconnected developments. It is difficult to determine one’s stance on the second part of the process if democracy is not put forward to start with (regardless of how complete the model proposed may be) as an alternative to the authoritarian regime and steps have not been taken to move towards it in some form or another.

Take for example the case of the Syrian Revolution, just in motivation, yet woefully tragic in outcome. In this revolution against a brutal authoritarian regime, there was never consensus on a democratic programme of any kind between the revolution’s armed factions. Although the institutions of the political opposition did put forward democratic programmes, the main armed factions rejected them – as did the regime, of course. The struggle quickly transformed into a civil war, with direct Iranian and Russian intervention on the side of dictatorship. While the collapse of authoritarian regimes in Libya and Yemen were followed by attempts in this direction (elections in Libya, national dialogue and a Government of Accord in Yemen), the Syrian regime did not fall, nor did the revolution effect the beginnings of a democratic

3 In spite of the rarity of democratic transitions after military coups – only 14 coups of some 217 between 1945 and 2008 led to democratic transformation, i.e. only 6.4%. See: Monty G. Marshall & Donna Ramsey Marshall, “Coup d’Etat Events, 1946–2013,” Center for Systemic Peace (2014); Patrick McGowan, “African Military Coups d’Etat, 1956–2001: Frequency, Trends and Distribution,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 41, no. 3 (2003), p. 340; Quoted in: Omar Ashour, “Collusion to Crackdown: Islamist-Military Relations in Egypt,” Brookings Papers (March 2015), accessed on 30/4/2019, at: <https://brookings/2RF7pn4>.

We might add armed resistance to despotism (despite the similarly rare incidence of successful democratic transformation following it), as Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan argue in a study of 323 cases of both violent and non-violent resistance to despotism and colonialism. See: Maria J. Stephan & Erica Chenoweth, “Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict,” *International Security*, vol. 33, no. 1 (Summer 2008), pp. 7–44, accessed on 30/4/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2CXKiSq>

transition. It would thus be difficult to characterise local and international powers' policies in Syria as attitudes to democratic transformation *per se*. The extent to which the agendas of states like Turkey or the GCC countries agree with the opposition on democracy has not been tested. And the US, while certainly preferring an Assad exit in the early stages of the revolution, was unsure whether the best alternative was a military coup or sectarian power-sharing – or an ill-defined popular alternative – and was ultimately quick to abandon its goal of ousting Assad. Iran and Russia, meanwhile, played a decisive role in saving the regime from its otherwise inevitable fall. The influence of Iran and Russia will certainly not remain merely external: their intervention has had wide-ranging repercussions on society and state in Syria, study of which falls outside the scope of transition studies. In Syria, transition never began to start with. I distinguish it here from other cases which began and then failed, which should be studied within a transitions studies framework.

In Tunisia and Egypt the influence of foreign states on the revolutions themselves was weak and muted, limited to public statements and telephone calls between presidents. From Assad's perspective, if Hosni Mubarak and Zeinabedine Ben Ali had stood firm and supported by their armies, then international allies would have stood with them. International factors also had limited influence on splits within the regimes over the appropriate response to the revolution, the popular ousting of both presidents, and the divisions that it produced. There are various indicators that the US encouraged the leadership of the Egyptian army not to use violence against demonstrators during the 25 January Revolution.

But in the 2011 - 2013 democratic transition period, which is the second phase of transition (and not yet the consolidation phase), external influence became active and noticeable, even if it was only decisive through the operation of local factors. If we imagine

an internal agreement between Egyptian political elites on the principles of the democratic system and a decisive commitment on their part to the transition process that all actors could elevate above their party-political and ideological differences – and if the Egyptian army like their Tunisian counterparts had not aspired to rule themselves – then external factors would not have been so important. The aforementioned internal factors made Saudi and Emirati media support (and overt and semi-overt financial support) for the forces of the counterrevolution and the old regime in Egypt effective, to the point of turning the tide in their favour.<sup>(4)</sup> US policy, on the other hand, was not decisive at any point. But when it declined to provide support to the elected government in Egypt, and when it refused to consider the military coup a coup – which meant not imposing sanctions – it made it easier for the forces of the old regime and the counterrevolution to stall democratic transition. It was the internal factors that were crucial, but they would not have been sufficient to reverse transition towards dictatorship if not for the factors of external intervention.

European policy, which made financial support conditional on administrative and legal reform, never incentivised any authoritarian regime to conduct radical reforms that would also lead to real transition. Europe has always been ready in any case to abandon human rights and democracy as long as authoritarian regimes are willing to prevent migration, fight terrorism and keep buying weapons. But European support for the post-revolutionary Tunisian economy, tardy though it was, was important. In the same way, the breaking of Egypt's post-coup diplomatic isolation was important to the survival of an authoritarian regime that had purged the Egyptian public sphere, suppressed the opposition and imprisoned an elected president, and who did not receive serious European, or American, support for the economy or in navigating the difficult period following the revolution.

## Bringing back the external factor

Transitologists have certainly been aware of the importance of international factors, particularly regional ones. But they have not given them

particularly great importance or singled them out for study. One of the most important conclusions of the fourth volume of *Transitions from Authoritarian*

4 Azmi Bishara, *Thawrat Misr : Min ath-Thawra ila'l-Inqilab [The Egyptian Revolution, Vol. II: From Revolution to Coup d'Etat]* (Doha, Beirut: ACRPS, 2016), pp. 215 - 250.

*Rule*<sup>(5)</sup> is that local factors play the primary role in transition, which of course contradicts dependency theory and world systems theory. This focus on the internal, and neglect or neutralisation of the external – similar to their emphasis of the importance of the political actors (some would say human agency) over social structural factors – is driven primarily by their intellectual starting-point: their aim has been to demonstrate the importance of political action in democratic change and to encourage political elites to believe that it is possible to topple dictatorships and transition to democracy. If we consider the subject of these transitology studies – transformations in Latin America – we find that changes in US policy towards Latin American dictatorships, particularly since the Carter administration began to emphasise human rights, have played an indecisive but nonetheless undeniable role. Even if these changes did not promote democracy, they did at least put an end to the efforts to block transition that had been a consistent part of the Cold War US policy of support for allied dictatorships, especially when the enemy of those dictatorships was the left (which articulated popular demands against oppression and for social justice, but was in turn not democratic). In South America, which the US considered its sphere of influence, it did not want to risk even a liberal-democratic alternative to authoritarian regimes, fearing a loss of control.<sup>(6)</sup> A study has since been published showing that the US

did not intervene directly in the famous and decisive military coups against democratic regimes (Brazil in 1964, Chile in 1973) but that there was an intersection of interests between a US position on high alert against the emergence of more leftist governments after the Cuban Revolution and conservative and social political forces in these two countries, joined by the military when they too were threatened. This does not mean that there was no US support for these mobilisations, but that it was not the US that took the initiative and made the plans.<sup>(7)</sup> Kurt Weyland has likewise responded to Levitsky and Way's<sup>(8)</sup> popular hypothesis that relations with the West influenced non-democratic rulers to transition towards democracy or move towards democratic reform, saying that the last two decades demonstrate that this theory is unsound – although this did happen in Venezuela, tied to the US by a strong economic and political relationship, which moved towards a competitive authoritarian regime.<sup>(9)</sup> Nonetheless, these studies do not refute the influence of competing Cold War blocs in impeding democracy. That they did so is certain, more so than any external influence pushing regimes towards democratic transition from outside, which was rare during the Cold War. Its rarity notwithstanding, this too could be decisive in cases of direct intervention where the internal conditions were favourable (compare the imposition of democracy in Germany and Japan and its imposition in Iraq).

5 Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter & Laurence Whitehead (eds.), *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, four volumes (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

6 It is in this context that US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger made his famous declaration, following the Chilean elections that brought Salvador Allende to power, that he '[didn't] see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people.' From the New York Times archive.

See: Anthony Lewis, "The Kissinger Doctrine," *The New York Times*, February 27, 1975, accessed on 30/4/2019, at: <https://nyti.ms/2VykEW>

7 Kurt Weyland discusses the most extreme case of assumed American influence in global regime change, Latin America, demonstrating that US influence is of a more limited degree than is usually claimed. In doing so he draws on State Department and intelligence documents pertaining to coups and regime changes. The importance of the US's role decreased gradually over the course of the 20th century, becoming more limited thanks to internal confusion and disagreement and a lack of coordination between different institutions and numerous actors within the US administration. The intersection of interests between the US and those who carried out military coups is usually explained as if they were US agents or acting on Washington's orders. Weyland asserts that in most of the cases the actors conducting the coupes in Latin America had enough motivations to do so without even the US requesting it. The author says that the US found it very difficult to expel the Sandinistas from government in Nicaragua and failed in the case of Cuba. Direct military influence was possible in small countries like Grenada and Panama. Although the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a unipolar system seemed to enormously increase US influence, the limits of this influence were shown by the emergence of left-leaning regimes in the 1990s, including Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador. In spite of US support and the strong economic relationship with Nicaragua and these three countries, the US did not prevent these countries from slipping into competitive authoritarianism. An even greater failure was in Haiti, where US support and diplomatic pressure failed to consolidate democracy; elections were delayed by several years and the US was unable to put in place the infrastructure for democracy in even a weak ally in spite of its economic and political influence. The only government that was expelled by US invasion was Noriega's government in Panama in 1989. The US also intervened in civil wars in the Dominican Republic (1965) and Grenada (1983), ousting presidents who had come to power through bloody coups. These are all the cases of direct US military intervention in Latin America in the second half of the twentieth century. See: Kurt Weyland, "Limits of US Influence: The promotion of Regime Change in Latin America," *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, vol. 10, no. 3 (2018), pp. 137-140, accessed on 29/4/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2Pe5R7C>.

8 Steven Levitsky & Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

9 Weyland, p. 147.

These changes to the US agenda were accompanied by the rise of democratic opposition forces and a shift in leftist forces' ideas on liberal democracy towards accepting it as a feasible framework for the realisation of social justice. This was a transformation that the European Left had gone through previously. If we return to transformations in the Southern European countries, meanwhile, we find that it is not possible to dispense with a fundamental element in understanding transformation: the Western European democratic context. This must be considered not only in terms of its attractiveness, or simply the presence of a general feeling of discomfort regarding the exception within the European cultural framework itself among the peoples of Spain, Greece and Portugal, but also in terms of the desire to join the Common European Market and then the European Union, based on the interests of ascendant economic and commercial classes. This is all relevant to transition – as far as the sustainability of democracy in those countries is concerned, there is no denying how important their incorporation into the Common Market and then the EU was to their post-dictatorship economic revivals, including improvement in living standards. The conditions for democratic transition in Southern Europe (Greece, Portugal, Spain) were essentially internal. But the European environment certainly supported these conditions and strongly influenced on how sustainable democracy was.

The external factor cannot be ignored in cases which cannot be understood without it. It was decisive in the democratisation of the Eastern European states after the USSR began its reforms and withdrew its protection from Communist Party regimes. This is why Philippe Schmitter has concluded that it is high time that we re-evaluate the influence of the international environment on regime change without elevating it to the level of a primary driver.<sup>(10)</sup> This is despite the fact that the external factor was essential in impeding democracy during the Cold War era, before it attracted the attention of transitologists – and indeed itself became an internal factor in preserving despotic regimes allied to the two blocs, for example

in the cases of Eastern Europe and Latin America, as well as the Middle East and East Asia.<sup>(11)</sup>

Transitology was forced to modify its methodology in Eastern Europe because democratic transition would not have been possible there without the external factor: the Soviet crisis and top-down reform and the unequivocal withdrawal of Soviet protection from the threat of popular uprisings, recognised simultaneously by local leadership and opposition forces. This simultaneous recognition prevented the use of violence and many deaths: everybody realised that these regimes were on the brink of collapse and lacked both social bases and popular legitimacy (unlike cases such authoritarian regimes as Cuba or China that could claim that socialist revolution is a part of national history and modern identity).

The role of the external factor was not limited to the regional (i.e. the geographical region, the socialist bloc and military alliance). It would also not be possible to understand Soviet reform and its timing without another external factor: the escalatory policy of the Reagan administration and the Thatcher government, particularly in the nuclear arms race, the escalation of media discourse, support for the Afghan Mujahidin, the total defeat of the Soviets in economic growth terms (both in quantity and quality) and the collapse of the price of oil, in which the Gulf countries, headed by Saudi Arabia, played a role. But it was still in any case a local choice made by political elites – that is, there were internal forces within the intelligence apparatus, represented by Yuri Andropov, and in the Communist Party, represented by Mikhail Gorbachev, who concluded based on this defeat that it was the best option. They were driven to this conclusion by a complex mixture of economic and administrative breakdown within the state, an ideological vacuum, economic crisis and administrative and social stagnation. And they were able to impose perestroika and glasnost from above because of the centralised system of obedience within the Communist Party.

The external factor also showed its importance in the central role played by the European Union in the

<sup>10</sup> Philippe C. Schmitter, "The Influence of the International Context upon the Choice of National Institutions and Policies in Neo-Democracies," in: Laurence Whitehead (ed.), *The International Dimensions of Democratization: Europe and the Americas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> Even further back, it was not possible to understand democracy in Japan and Germany without the US imposing it after the Second World War in Japan and the Allied administration in the areas under their control in West Germany. Neither can the sustainability and consolidation of a democratic system, be understood without knowledge of the internal factors in Germany and Japan and their modern history, including previous experimenting with democracy .

(very variably) successful transition of some Eastern European states to liberal democracy. The states that seceded from the Soviet Union and remained under the influence of the Russian Federation did not become democracies.

If we are precise we find that what are referred to here as external factors are in most cases *regional* factors, or the regional environment. We will note later that the so-called first, second, and third ‘global democratic waves’ are, in fact, composed of regional and not international waves: Northern Europe, the US and Western Europe, Southern Europe, Latin America, Eastern Europe, African countries, East Asia, and perhaps the Arab World where the wave of stormy transformation has not yet broken and its results cannot yet be predicted. The waves of democratic transition through the influence and attractiveness of other models are generally *regional* waves in which peoples and regimes are influenced by countries that are geographically or culturally close to them, and which sometimes have similar social or political structures. An exception to this is cases of regime-building through the influence of external occupation forces – as in Japan, Germany, Italy, and more recently Iraq (where the model is still struggling for survival) – in cooperation with local forces.

The regional factor has a direct influence on the country in question. This influence can be observed by any Arab citizen in Saudi and Emirati interventions to impede democratic transition in the Arab region, work against it and support those who oppose it in any Arab country. We might say that generally speaking Arab countries have not been supportive of any Arab democratic transition – the complete opposite of the popular enthusiasm such transitions enjoy. Thus the regional environment is one of the elements complicating Arab democratisation.

Attila Ágh believes that in Eastern Europe and the Balkans after the collapse of one-party rule there was great reliance on the exterior, and that the influence of the regional environment was of more importance than the internal dynamic, because small and weak semi-peripheral states were more dependent in their

development on the dictates of the external factor which influenced their political form.<sup>(12)</sup> The rules of European institutions, especially the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, are now binding on all European states, and these vital dispensations for democratisation have been imposed as preconditions on member states or those that want to become members. In some cases in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, European institutions have become a sort of higher power.<sup>(13)</sup>

In this sense, the ‘limited sovereignty’ of these states under Soviet hegemony has been replaced by a sovereignty limited this time by European institutions. Rules such as democratic consensus, the freedom of the press, human rights, migration and minority rights are regulated and overseen by European institutions in a manner that not only restricts sovereignty regarding foreign affairs, but also domestic affairs as well.<sup>(14)</sup> In foreign policy, Europe has issued no specific orders, but rather than concluding from the absence of a unified and easily-imposed European foreign policy that they can develop their own policies, these countries have become the most closely aligned with the US in the European Union – particularly in their position on Palestine, required in order to draw closer to the US. It is as if they have replaced dependency in foreign policy on *a* great power to dependency to *the* great power of the new bloc to which they now belong.

It has since become clear that European influence is not one-dimensional or unidirectional but has become a weapon in the hands of populist nationalists who reject Western influence on the grounds of national sovereignty and cultural specificity. In some cases these forces have taken power (e.g. in Hungary) and have attempted to roll back even the achievements of democracy. Vladimir Putin’s rightist-populist policy and Russia’s return to a more influential international role via Syria and through a more assertive rejection of NATO expansion in Eastern Europe have encouraged right-populist nationalist movements in countries which are relatively recent converts to democracy, as well as in Europe more

12 Attila Ágh, “Processes of Democratization in the East Central European and Balkan States: Sovereignty-Related Conflicts in the Context of Europeanization,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 32, no. 3 (September 1999), p. 264, accessed on 29/4/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2NbPAuC>

13 *Ibid.*, p. 266.

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 267 - 268.

generally. In the era of Trump and his anti-liberal discourse it has been easy for these Putinist currents to coexist alongside alliances with the US.

The first of the Copenhagen Criteria for EU Membership laid down in June 1993 is that there must be stable democratic institutions operating through the rule of law and human rights. But the second criterion is recognition of the importance of respecting and protecting minorities. This criterion has driven countries joining the EU to adopt a sort of consociationalism and accept the idea that minorities have collective rights, despite the fact that this has the capacity to create problems even for older member states where democracy was consolidated without the constitutional tools of consociational democracy.<sup>(15)</sup>

Certain features of consociationalism have been imposed on new members out of a conviction that in the presence of large ethnonational minorities, as in Spain, it is difficult to consolidate democracy without a constitution with consociational features. These criteria are now among the most important mechanisms by which countries like Hungary, Croatia and Slovakia can be held to account on minority rights issues.

Attila Ágh accounts for the differing levels of democratic transition between Balkan and Eastern European states by the fact that most Eastern European states have prior experience with democracy. This factor's role in the consolidation of democracy post-transition has previously been noted by other researchers. The Balkan states, meanwhile, generally have no prior experience of democracy and thus no democratic heritage that can be drawn upon. Equally, the peoples of those countries - with some democratic experience mixed with nationalist sentiments against Russian dominance - were also those who resisted Soviet-imposed socialism in 1956 (Hungary), 1968 (Czechoslovakia) and 1980 (Poland), thereby gaining experience with protest<sup>(16)</sup> and acquiring symbols of demands for democracy and resistance to Soviet influence which could be revived later. This heritage was supplemented by the emergence of a Polish and Czech opposition capable of negotiating with the

ruling elite when the opportunity arose, i.e. with the beginning of Soviet reform and the attenuation of the regime. In the Balkan countries, meanwhile, ruling elites moved towards transition under pressure from external factors, in an attempt to avoid losing the initiative and being forced to fulfil an unending series of democratic demands. Balkan peoples only mobilised later, in a delayed reaction, whereupon ruling elites attempted to retain their power and offered a few concessions to the opposition. The result was gradual, peaceful and radical economic and political change in the countries of Eastern Europe, while in the Balkans transformation was less radical and more violent and in some cases approached civil war.

In my view, the primary reason for this is that the collapse of the Soviet bloc, although *necessary*, was not *sufficient* to deprive Balkan authoritarianism of its sources of legitimacy. The authoritarian regimes of the Balkans were not at the Soviets' beck and call, unlike their counterparts in Eastern Europe (East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland) which lacked historical legitimacy and collapsed without a single bullet being fired once Russian protection was withdrawn. The second reason is the ethnic and national makeup of these countries, which complicated democratic transition. Solving ethnic questions, even violently, became a precondition of the emergence of national entities that could provide a framework for political pluralism. The Balkans showed the 'dark side of democracy', as represented by racial cleansing.<sup>(17)</sup>

The importance of the external factor in impeding democracy in other areas of the world influenced by the Cold War decreased when this war came to an end and the bipolar system crumbled. Western states, particularly the US, were no longer eager to support despotism. But this does not mean that they were now keen to support democracy or prepared to go to war to this end. Researchers and commentators often conflate two things here: the US did not become the standard-bearer of democracy in the post-Cold War era, but rather became less committed to supporting its despotic allies (and even then not in all cases,

15 Ibid, p. 275.

16 Ibid, p. 269.

17 Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Chapter 12 "Yugoslavia, I: Into the Danger Zone," pp. 353-381, and Chapter 13 "Yugoslavia, II: Murderous Cleansing," pp. 382 - 427. I don't agree with Michael Mann. Nationalism and civil war caused ethnic cleansing. The emergence of the nation state is a historical prerequisite for modern democracy, but this doesn't mean that democracy brought to nationalist secessions from multi-national states.

because the so-called War on Terror changed the picture, particularly in the Arab region).

The US's occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, not at all motivated by democracy, was followed by as yet unconsolidated attempts to back the setting-up of elected institutions and democratic constitutions. Neither of these two attempts provides an attractive model, however, because they were accompanied by foreign occupation and a 'political process' conducted under Western tutelage,<sup>(18)</sup> and because they are associated with civil and sectarian war and regimes' failure to guarantee stability and provide basic services.

During the Cold War, the great powers were prepared to prevent change to an allied regime (Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Afghanistan, South Vietnam, South Korea – not to mention the various French interventions in Africa), indirectly – e.g. through military coups intended to put paid to any possibility of systemic government change – or sometimes directly. Since the end of the Cold War, however, internal factors have become more capable of deciding the success or failure of changes to the system of government. Once the regime issue is settled, the international system generally accepts the victors as rulers so long as they succeed in getting a tight grip and imposing their power on the ground, irrespective of the manner by which they do so. But even with this sea change, regional factors have continued to be very effective in encouraging or impeding transition, and perhaps in stalling it once it has taken place. Putinist Russia's policies, for example, can be considered regional factors within what it considers to be its sphere of influence in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Ukraine – and even in the intervention in Syria, which represents a qualitative shift in post-Cold War Russian policy.

Transitology has shown an interest in the regional factor; its subject, after all, was originally the two waves of regional spread of democracy in Southern Europe and Latin America, and later in Eastern Europe. As far as the regional spread of democracy is concerned, Laurence Whitehead suggests three

routes: 1) spread by contagion, 2) oversight and control as in the case of EU, NATO and IMF criteria, and 3) consent, which cannot be restricted to foreign factors alone.<sup>(19)</sup>

Conscious of this gap, the transitology literature has divided foreign factors in democratic transition into five different processes: 1) spread, i.e. the spread of relatively neutral information over borders under the influence of democratisation processes in neighbouring countries, or through the influence of successful models as the result of the spread of information and communications technology; 2) direct support of democracy by Western states and specifically the US, where pressure is imposed for democratic transition or to impose democracy as happened in Haiti, Panama and Serbia, or direct invasion as happened in Iraq; 3) multidimensional conditionality in cases where economic support and membership of international organisations is tied to government performance in democracy and human rights, one of the most successful examples of which is EU membership criteria; 4) external support to promote democracy, in which context western states have increased their support for civil training and education, help to regulate elections and reform in electoral systems and the judicial apparatus, and support for independent media; and 5) networks of organisations working in 'advocacy' or 'empowerment'<sup>(20)</sup>, in the sense of advocating for issues pertaining to human rights, democracy, elections etc through non-governmental networks with support from European and US funds, and empowering social forces to exercise political influence. I do not believe that these factors are at play in the Arab region, since they have either been absent entirely (1 to 3) or had extremely limited influence (the latter two factors). We might add to this list the emergence of a regional system rejecting military coups, e.g. the African Union, or supporting democracy as is the case in (pre-Trump) Latin America. Neither of these exists in the Arab case either.

These factors can only be understood if we begin with the concerns and interests of the great powers

18 See: Azmi Bishara, *Fi'l-Mas'ala al-'Arabiyya: Muqaddima li-Bayan Dimuqrati 'Arabi* [On the Arab Question: Introduction to an Arab Democratic Manifesto] (Doha: ACRPS, 2018), pp. 63-64, 72 - 73.

19 Laurence Whitehead, "Three International Dimensions of Democratization," in: Whitehead (ed.), *The International Dimensions of Democratization*, pp. 3-25.

20 Ibid, pp. 38 - 39.



and the particular circumstances of each country – and only then if the state representing the most powerful ‘external factor’ has the political will to exercise influence in a particular direction. Democracy was imposed in Serbia, for example, as the residual Soviet influence in Eastern Europe was in retreat, after a military intervention concerned not with democracy but genocidal war and ethnic cleansing. But in Syria, under similar circumstances of massacre and displacement, this did not happen, because of US re-evaluation of military intervention after the occupation of Iraq, a lack of confidence in the alternatives, and a fear of instability on Israel’s borders. The safety of Israel is

one of the most important considerations influencing the US’s fear of democratic transition in states neighbouring Palestine, especially Egypt and Syria. Russia has exploited this to expand its own influence, based on a geostrategic doctrine that itself includes elements suspicious of democracy on the grounds that it is a form of Western cultural and political influence. The US’s tendency towards isolationism and non-interventionism has increased since the election of President Trump, who openly supports allied dictatorships – with the difference being that in return he demands protection money: cash for peace and unconditional loyalty to the US.

## US transformations

The US model – democracy, the society of abundance, the American lifestyle – was certainly an international factor in the *attractiveness* of democracy before the Second World War. But exporting democracy was not US policy in any respect. During the Cold War, the US supported allied dictatorships just as the Soviet Union did. We should thus not dismiss the reduction in US support for Latin American dictatorships under Jimmy Carter at the end of the 1970s, before the end of the Cold War. Congress had previously enacted the Foreign Assistance Act on 4 September 1961, under which the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was established by a decree from John F. Kennedy. But although USAID did contribute limited political development funds in the 1960s and 1970s, US support was not made conditional on democracy or even human rights issues, and technical support aimed specifically at promoting democracy represented only a small part of total aid. It was only at the end of the 1970s that development aid to Latin American countries began to be tied to ‘political development’. In 1975, Section 116 was added to the Foreign Assistance Act, which stated that no assistance may be provided to the government of any country which violated any of the internationally recognized human rights. In 1978, the Congress added Section 116-e to this Act which gives the USAID the power to develop programmes to promote rights and freedoms abroad. By this point

it had already begun to work to disseminate the idea that the ‘doctrine of human rights’ was fundamental to international relations.

Under the Reagan administration in the 1980s Project Democracy was established, with funding from the US government to create a programme providing assistance in spreading democracy. In November 1983 the National Endowment for Democracy was founded, with bipartisan support, also with the aim of achieving growth and promoting democratic institutions worldwide.<sup>(21)</sup> And in 1985, Reagan created a USAID office explicitly dedicated to funding democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean. In the early days of 1989, USAID spent approximately 100 million US dollars on democracy programmes, which focused on human rights, democratic participation and the rule of law and elections. But in the 1980s the emphasis remained essentially limited to Latin America, with the exception of a few attempts of limited scope in Asia.<sup>(22)</sup> At this stage support for democracy had become a tool of US Cold War policy. This must be distinguished from the different policy pursued by the US after the Cold War had ended. Although this distinction is feasible academically speaking, for the peoples involved it has not been so easy: US support for democracy has always been tied to the struggle for influence and what has been referred to since the Cold War era as the ‘double standard’.

21 Thomas Carothers, “The Resurgence of the United States Political Development Assistance to Latin America in the 1980s,” in: Whitehead (ed.), *The International Dimensions of Democratization*, pp. 126 - 127.

22 Thomas Carothers, *Revitalizing U.S. Democracy Assistance* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009), pp. 9 - 10.

The Clinton era saw support for the emergence of democracy in Eastern Europe and expansion in all parts of the areas of influence close to Russia itself, and likewise transitions in Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast and East Asia. This drove the US to noticeably increase funding and expand its scope to support this trajectory. The Global Democracy Initiative was announced in 1990. In 1993, USAID took a series of steps to give institutional character to political aid. Its spending on programmes of democracy and governance support increased enormously within those years, from 165 million in 1991 to 635 million in early 1999. Funding was distributed within a wider scope in all areas that the Agency was active in. For example, spending on democracy and governance in 1999 distributed 288 million dollars in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, 123 million dollars in Sub-Saharan Africa, 111 million dollars in Asia and the Middle East, 86 million dollars in Latin America, and 27 million dollars on global programmes.<sup>(23)</sup>

During George W. Bush's first term, the policy of spreading democracy was wound down somewhat and USAID funding for promotion of democracy was reduced broadly speaking; the President and his team had little interest in the agency and its work. The Bush administration reduced the organisation's operations, indicating the absence of a 'high-level' commitment to promoting democracy. USAID was reorganised in 2002 and its 'Center for Democracy and Governance' downgraded to an 'Office', with humanitarian aid and other similar issues considered to be of greater priority dominating its agenda. The Agency also stopped or sometimes reduced its operations in training programmes pertaining to democracy and governance as part of the general reduction. In 2006, the work of the Political Office in the US was halted when the agency as a whole was placed under the supervision of the State Department, limiting its capacity to contribute to democracy and governance issues. At the end of the Bush period, in spite of his rhetorical emphasis on the 'global freedom agenda', in the context of the war against Iraq, the Agency had no high-level official exclusively focused on democracy issues. Specialists on democracy and governance in the Office for Democracy and Governance continued

to conduct studies on the matter, in spite of USAID senior management's not giving priority to working on democracy.<sup>(24)</sup> Since 2006, the Agency's work to support democracy has come to be represented in one of the State Department's strategic aims, under the title 'Governing Justly and Democratically', which covers a broad range of activities through funding in four fields: 1) rule of law and promoting human rights; 2) good governance; 3) support for political competition and consensus-building; 4) support for civil society.

The agency continued to operate in spite of reduced funding thanks to cash injections earmarked specifically for Iraq and Afghanistan. Spreading democracy was not the purpose of either war, but there were forces in the administration – such as the neoconservatives – who preferred to think that it was, and it was in the administration's interest (both realists and neocons) to portray the wars in this way. The neocons wanted to finish off George Bush Sr.'s 'unfinished war' in Iraq, and were joined by conservatives who agreed to strike first Afghanistan and then Iraq under the slogan of 'democratic realism', a phrase taken from the title of a 2004 essay<sup>(25)</sup> attempting to provide a theoretical justification for the US intervention in Iraq a year earlier. What was meant by this was that democracy should be disseminated exclusively where it served US foreign policy. According to this logic, the 'West' cannot attack every tyrant at once, but should do so selectively in accordance with its strategic interests. The article makes no reference to the other side of this policy, which also forms brazen alliances with tyrants. And as far as 'selective' warfare is concerned, 'democracy' here is a cosmetic accessory for another *casus belli*: the main driver for intervention against a given regime as opposed to another is strategic interest, not democracy. The latter is neither necessary or sufficient to explain intervention anywhere. Nonetheless, the US administration could later claim that the intervention had *tried* to establish democracy, whether it succeeded or failed. And it is not difficult to understand failure, particularly given that democratic regimes accept criticism. Ultimately it can be accounted for by whether democracy in the country in question was useful or harmful to US interests.

23 Ibid, pp. 10 - 11.

24 Ibid, pp. 11 - 12.

25 Charles Krauthammer, *Democratic Realism: An American Foreign Policy for a Unipolar World* (Washington, D.C.: The AEI Press, 2004). accessed on 29/4/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2PQ25Av>.

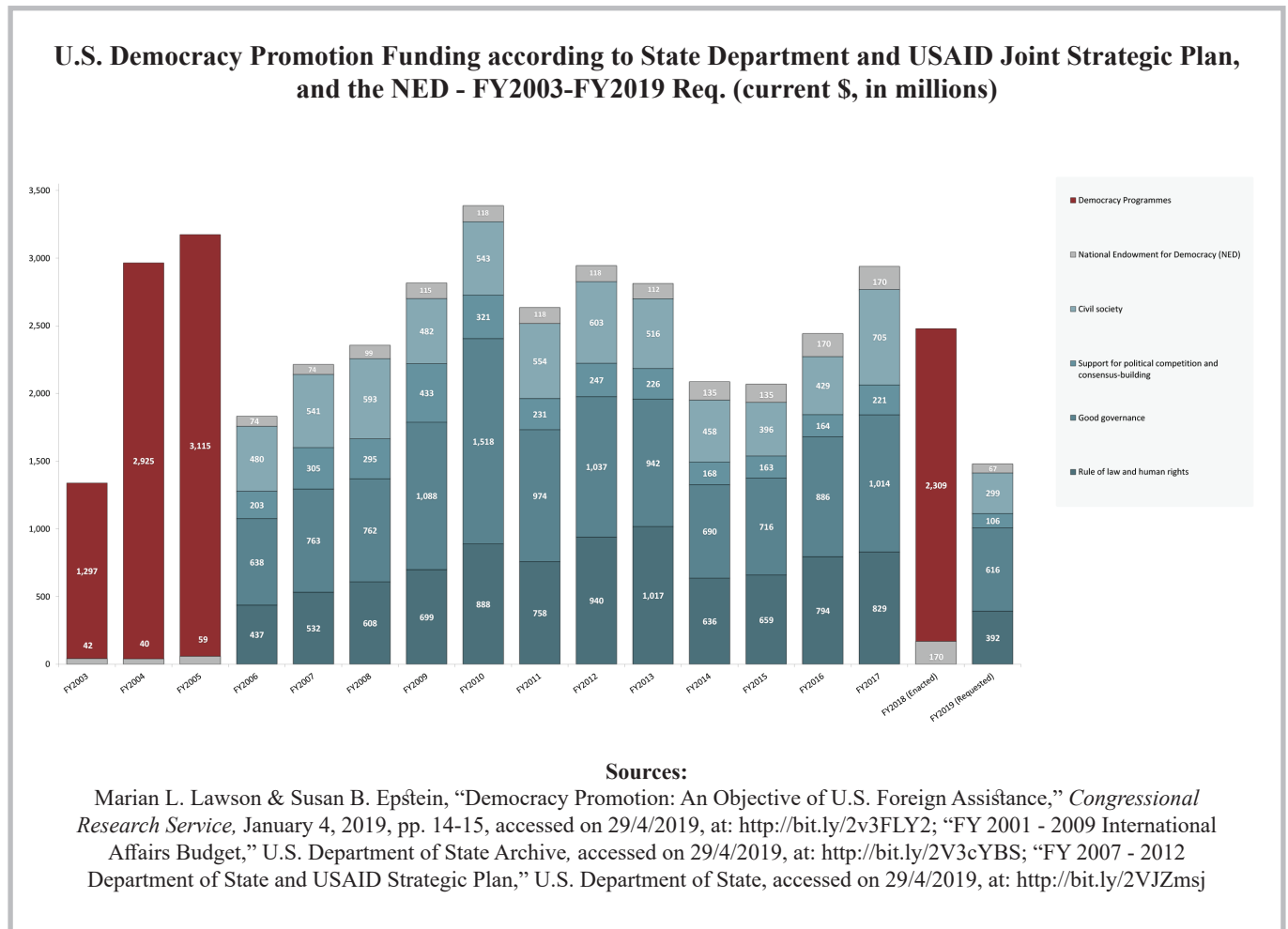
**US State Department, USAID and NED funding to strengthen democracy  
(current \$, in millions)**

Financial year	Funding for the State Department and USAID					National Endowment for Democracy (NED)
	Governing Justly and Democratically (GJD)					
	Rule of law and human rights	Good governance	Support for political competition and consensus-building	Civil society	Total	
2003	--	--	--	--	1,297	42
2004	--	--	--	--	2,925	40
2005	--	--	--	--	3,115	59
2006	437	638	203	480	1,758	74
2007	532	763	305	541	2,141	74
2008	608	762	295	593	2,259	99
2009	699	1,088	433	482	2,702	115
2010	888	1,518	321	543	3,269	118
2011	758	974	231	554	2,517	118
2012	940	1,037	247	603	2,826	118
2013	1017	942	226	516	2,701	112
2014	636	690	168	458	1,952	135
2015	659	716	163	396	1,934	135
2016	794	886	164	429	2,273	170
2017	829	1,014	221	705	2,769	170
2018**	--	--	--	--	2,309	170
2019***	392	616	106	299	1,413	67

\* Before 2006 funding fell under support for 'governance and civil society'.

\*\* Budget

\*\*\* Funding required



In the Arab region, the US has prevaricated as regards democracy whenever election results have shown advances for Islamist forces. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood enjoyed success in the Egyptian Popular Assembly elections of 2005, where they became the largest opposition body in parliament, and Hamas were victorious in legislative elections in Palestine in 2006. The 1989 Jordanian elections for the House of Representatives had already demonstrated this earlier, with the Islamic Movement taking 25% of seats, and was considered a clear indicator of its growing popularity. The same happened in the elections of 1993, when they won 20% of seats despite the use of the 'Single Vote' law in these elections. And the Islamist victory in the Algerian elections of 1991 and the subsequent coup and civil war continue to loom large.

Charles Krauthammer summarises the axiom of democratic realism as follows: 'We will support democracy everywhere, but we will commit blood

and treasure only in places where there is a strategic necessity - meaning, places central to the larger war against the existential enemy, the enemy that poses a global mortal threat to freedom... [T]he new existential enemy, the Arab-Islamic totalitarianism that has threatened us in both its secular and religious forms for the quarter-century since the Khomeini revolution of 1979.'<sup>(26)</sup> This is supposed to replace the axiom of supporting democracy anywhere and at any cost. But this ostensible axiom never existed to start with, and so this 'new' axiom is not new but rather a Cold War policy that has found itself a new global enemy. And despite the fact that there is no comparison between this new enemy and the old enemy in terms of its size and the danger it presents, it is depicted as a global existential threat.

The author of the 'Democratic Realism' essay distinguishes between Democrats and Republicans: Republican intervention will typically be based on political realism and an attempt to link interests

with the democratic option, or indeed in pursuit of interest alone, while Democrats consider legitimate intervention to be that which is devoid of pure national interest, based on values.<sup>(27)</sup> This is of course incorrect, and was shown to be so recently by Barack Obama's political behaviour – the 'most democratic' Democratic president, if you will – when he spent a long time going back and forth before backing transition in Egypt, and even then only in his public position. Hillary Clinton on the other hand – then Secretary of State and later Democratic nominee for the presidency – advocated supporting Mubarak.<sup>(28)</sup> Obama was quick to abandon his moral support for democratic revolutions, preferring to follow a cautious policy that did not risk having to wait for the results of Egyptian elections every four years, particularly as pertained to issues of Israel's security and fear of Islamists. Even before this Obama had not taken a clear position on the Tunisian revolution.

Democratic realism continued to be common in the administration after the Iraq War. Official US rhetoric in the Obama era was ostensibly supportive of democracy worldwide, but in practice was very cautious in its opposition to authoritarian regimes and support for democracy for fear of the results and because of the lessons of previous US interventions. Sometimes another 'democratic' argument is invoked, one common among the Western peace movements that are part of the electoral base of presidents like Obama: the impermissibility of intervention in foreign countries and respect for other peoples' way of life. In some peace movement circles there has been insufficient distinction made between anti-imperialism and sympathy for dictators.

Krauthammer traces the idea of exporting democracy, the identification of the will to *freedom* rather than the will to *power* as the engine of history, from the anti-Communist Truman administration of 1947 through Kennedy's 1961 inaugural address to Reagan's 1983 speech on the 'evil empire'. He considers Bush's rhetoric on the eve of the Iraq War to be that of freedom versus tyranny, and the enemy to be 'Arab-Islamic totalitarianism' whether religious or secular.<sup>(29)</sup> But there is a difference between political-ideological rhetoric

and realist political practice. All the aforementioned US presidents placed state imperial interests before the export of democracy. The US did not enter WWII in order to export democracy, but the occupation of Germany and Japan provided occasion to build democratic regimes allied with the US. Neither then nor later did they launch wars to establish democracy.

The issue has been much affected by the influence of advisors ideologically opposed to totalitarian regimes. Neocon doctrine is different from Woodrow Wilson's approach to spreading democracy in that it has no delusions regarding international institutions or 'international legitimacy', and believes in preventative wars rather than waiting for hostile acts against the West. From their perspective there is no value to passive defence in the face of agents who operate in secret and do not fear death, i.e. suicide bombers: they must be confronted through preventative military operations on foreign soil. They see authoritarian regimes as one of the most important drivers of terrorism. If they were just academics, this analysis would not be incorrect – but instead they have used it to justify an aggressive US policy working with Israeli agendas in the Middle East.

The US has never given active support to a democratic revolution or actively protected an elected Arab democratic regime while intervening militarily. It has always been selective in taking actively *negative* positions on Arab dictatorships, even under the neoconservatives, who abandoned their predecessors' wariness of the Arab World. Their purpose was first and foremost to intervene against authoritarian states opposed to Israel that might be able to build strong armies, above all Iraq. Getting bogged down in Iraq meant the abandonment of other plans. They sufficed themselves with insignificant pressure on allied states and were satisfied with superficial reform or indications that they were prepared to normalise relations with Israel in place of democratic reforms. Authoritarian regimes caught on to this, and adopted a policy of combating and invoking the spectre of terrorism – deploying these tactics equally against the peaceful political opposition – while using 'moderate' discourse only in relation to Palestine.

27 Ibid, p. 5.

28 Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2014), pp. 282-285; Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), p. 504.

29 Krauthammer, p. 14.

## 1) In the Arab World

Much has been written about changes in US policy towards despotic regimes after the Second World War and about how the policy of spreading democracy grew in strength. I have already shown that the fundamental change since the Carter era has been the gradual shrinking of the importance of allies and the unwillingness to pay with American soldiers' lives to save allied authoritarian regimes, a tendency which has become stronger since the Second World War. In modern history this policy surfaces in the USA's 'disloyalty' to its allies (the Shah of Iran, Marcos, Suharto, and later Mubarak). Under Putin, Russia has exploited this point by casting itself in the role of the more loyal ally. But in fact not much can be done to save a dictator from a popular revolution if the army does not stand alongside him, or unless it becomes a civil war providing a pretext for some kind of intervention.

However US policy on democracy can be understood to have changed, the Middle East region has remained an object of interest for Western states after the Cold War. Western interests in the region were tied to security concerns that have continued even after the Cold War, the most important being the continuing flow of oil and the rise of the so-called 'Islamist threat' after Russian withdrawal from Afghanistan, especially after 2001<sup>(30)</sup> – despite the US adoption of democratic rhetoric in its foreign policy. Added to this is US concern for Israeli interests and security as though it were a domestic US issue. The bigger problem is that this usually means accepting Israel's own conceptions of its security, conceptions which are incompatible with the existence of the Palestinian people and the interests and sovereignty of the states of the region.

The US has been prepared to accept superficial reforms on the initiative of allied regimes, and considered any elections held under authoritarian rule to represent great advances. It celebrated the reforms conducted in Egypt and Yemen and various monarchies in the 9th and the 10th decade of the 20th century, even though these reforms did not produce constitutional monarchies anywhere: in Jordan with political liberalisation after the Ma'an Uprising of 1989; Morocco with the various political, economic

and social transformations of the 1990s, particularly the constitutional reforms of 1992 and 1996; Bahrain at the end of the 1990s, when the current king took power in March 1999 and issued decrees in 2001 abrogating the State Security Law of 1975 and the issuing of the National Action Charter of 2001. The US did not press for the expansion of reforms. Nor did it protest against their revocation when regimes considered it appropriate – especially if this happened on the pretext of combating terrorism, the fight against which has been elevated to 'world war' status. Nor did the US put pressure on the autocratic Saudi regime to engage in democratic or even educational or religious reforms until after September 11. They were satisfied with Saudi involvement in the fight against terror and their spearheading the Arab peace initiative from 2002.

Generally speaking, the US position during the Cold War can be summarised as seeking to guarantee the flow of oil, working to preserve Israel's security, and preventing the expansion of Soviet influence in the region. They did this by supporting allied despotic-monarchical regimes against 'the threat of Communism', as well as the Egyptian regime, which switched its alliances from the USSR to the US and signed a separate peace with Israel under Anwar Sadat. Although this paper does not consider the Arab conflict with Israel as an external factor, it has been an influential factor in impeding democratic transformation. Alongside other factors, it has, since the Nakba, led to the stalling of the limited liberalisation and democratisation that Arab elites had begun and which had been inherited in administrative practices from the colonial governments in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan. These elites' defeat in 1948 and their subsequent association with failure in Palestine – as well as other factors, such as the high and chaotic turnover of elite parties giving expression to traditional elite power struggles (as opposed to the non-democratic ideological parties) and the failure to solve the agricultural problem – played a role in the military coups and the rise of the populist discourse that accompanied them. This discourse always emphasised efforts to liberate Palestine and 'win back Arab dignity', prioritising this battle over civil and political rights. This is to say that Palestine became a tool by which despotic regimes justified themselves,

30 Eva Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics*, vol. 36, no. 2 (January 2004), p. 148.

even after these regimes stopped fighting Israel in practice. And for those regimes which abandoned this rhetoric, peace with Israel without a just solution to the Palestinian issue likewise impeded democracy in several ways:

- The need of regimes for instruments of repression in confronting broad popular opposition to peace, and their fear of any truly democratic elections – even to elect parliamentarians with restricted powers – because of the popularity of the discourse rejecting peace with Israel.
- Western regimes turning a blind eye to repressive measures as long as they served ‘peace’, and treating peace with Israel as more important than human and civil rights.
- Security coordination with Israel itself to confront dangers to the regime. This seems to currently be an important part of the Sisi regime’s relations with Israel. In the Egyptian case, all peace agreements since the 1980s have been accompanied by closer ties between the army and the US in armament and training. The army has also entered the economic and commercial spheres, thus giving it an interest in maintaining the status quo and benefiting from it. All this represents a use of military aid stipulations, ignoring clauses pertaining to civilian control of the armed forces and human rights protections.

As far as historical western interventions are concerned, Lisa Anderson notes Morroe Berger, the first president of the Middle Eastern Studies Association (MESA), founded in the 1960s, who defined the problem of what he called ‘western policy’ as follows: ‘The West is confronted with the dilemma of supporting traditional autocrats or modern intellectuals who want to end Western influence’<sup>(31)</sup> This is true, because modernist forces in Arab countries at that time have generally been nationalist or leftist and adopted an ‘anti-imperialist’ discourse influenced by national liberation movements worldwide. These forces consider the US alliance with Israel to be a continuation of the colonial issue in the region.

From the Neocon perspective, solving this problem was easy after the Socialist Bloc collapsed and allied states were no longer so important. Having elevated ‘terrorism’ to the status of universal enemy, they associated despotism with the breeding of terror. George Bush Jr. stated in a famous speech that ‘in the long run stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty,’ openly contradicting the logic of the Cold War era in which the US and the Soviets preferred stability and existing governments that could be relied upon to the values that they advocated.<sup>(32)</sup> In this sense, the Neocons appeared more principled in their stance on dictatorships, including allied dictatorships. But their theorisation of military intervention in Iraq without any clear justification (and following an embargo of unprecedented length and scope), the revelation that Israeli concerns were at work in that policy, and their decision to treat Israel as an allied democracy under threat and turn a blind eye to its colonial policies and the Palestinian issue, mobilised Arab public opinion against ‘spreading democracy’ on the barrel of a gun.

The US was quick to abandon the neocon approach. Those opposed to US policy in the area agreed with area studies experts that Western interests lay in the steady flow of oil and that the West should be worried about the rising Islamist threat, and ‘these concerns have provided a compelling rationale to western policymakers to persist in providing patronage to many authoritarian states in the region.’<sup>(33)</sup> These concerns have remained in place after the Cold War, augmented by the necessity of supporting security apparatuses and armies that prevent instability and the emergence of threats to Israel’s security. In my view, this logic ultimately led, in combination with the failure of the occupation of Iraq, to the US administration abandoning not only of the idea of *exporting* democracy but of *supporting* it – particularly where it was clear that democracy would bring Islamists to power, as in the Palestinian Authority elections, or increase the Muslim Brotherhood’s power, as in the Egyptian elections of 2005. This was later repeated after the Egyptian revolution.

31 Lisa Anderson, “Searching Where the Light Shines: Studying Democratization in the Middle East,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2006), p. 193, accessed on 29/4/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2wcZSDi>; Morroe Berger, *The Arab World Today* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), p. 297.

32 Ibid., pp. 193-194; George W. Bush, “President Bush Discusses Freedom in Iraq and Middle East: Remarks by the President at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy,” The White House Archives of President George W. Bush, November 6, 2003, accessed on 29/4/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2C1CqiA>

33 Bellin, p. 148.

The US administration adopted a tolerant stance towards the military coup approaching total collaboration.<sup>(34)</sup>

The international factor is of great importance in the economic and political map of the Middle East; there are no economic relations unaffected by politics. This goes for external support based on political and geostrategic concerns just as it does the price of oil (determined by political negotiations) or economic deals with political motivations. It is clear that there is a concern for regime stability regardless of their nature. Despite some issues concerning human rights being brought up, this does not lead to real pressure being exercised. Other than rare cases like Sweden (and Germany in some cases), there is no binding internal mechanism for Western governments to be held to account by their parliaments on the fate of aid money. Some of the measures taken by regimes under criticism can be passed off as reform even if they are only cosmetic. Likewise, criticism does not usually have an effect on strategic and security relations or those pertaining to arms deals and the exchange of intelligence information. The more important a regime is from the strategic perspective, and the closer it is to oil wells or to Israel, the more concern the US and the great powers have for its stability.

Thus it is that the further away an Arab country is from the areas rich in oil and from the front lines with Israel, the less likely it is that international factors will intervene negatively in a democratic transition for fear of stability. The best example of this is the Tunisian case. Tunisia's geostrategic and economic marginality worked in favour of the success of democratic transformation there. Egypt's geostrategic importance, on the other hand, was an important factor in the intervention of foreign forces (Israel, the US, Saudi Arabia, the Emirates) that considered democracy itself in the Arab World to be a form of instability. The US thus feared the influence of popular opinion and the possibility that forces that would conflict with their interests would take power.

This concern for regime stability even extended to that of Muammar Gaddafi, which ruled a country rich in oil, despite the fact that Gaddafi was a long-term

enemy of US and European policy and considered a supporter of terrorism. Gaddafi had begun to modify his policy after the fall of the Soviet Union. He was thus accepted into that special club of states with whom the West is keen to maintain good relations in order to guarantee the flow of oil and prevent illegal migration to Europe. When a popular revolution broke out and turned quickly to a civil war, France and then the UK concluded, after some hesitation, that it was better to help decide the war in favour of the revolutionaries and the provisional National Congress, particularly given that Arab countries friendly to the West had helped support the Revolution for reasons related to inter-Arab relations. The US still greatly regrets being swept into the military intervention in Libya, because it preferred stability under Gaddafi to the chaos that broke out in his place.<sup>(35)</sup> The US took no steps after the war to strengthen the newborn, short-lived democracy. It was dragged into an aerial intervention against the Libyan regime, but it soon realised that the alternative was instability and the spread of Islamist forces, and thus left the field to the European states.

Regimes that aligned themselves against US and Western policy in the area in general, such as the Syrian and Libyan regimes, have been dealt with after the Cold War in a spirit of pragmatism. Their policy was subordinated to strategic regional issues, and the US showed themselves willing to engage in security coordination with them in matters pertaining to the War on Terror – especially when they showed the US that their help was needed, as when Syria lent support to resistance to the US presence in Iraq by allowing Jihadis to cross the border and backing some armed groups. But when the people mobilised and the opportunity arose, the US did not resist the fall of these regimes. In Syria, US policy was initially optimistic about the revolution and provided some political and financial support, but was later hesitant because of the fear of instability on the borders of Israel, and of the dangerous ascendancy of Salafi-Jihadist groups. Russia, on the other hand – which launched a major intervention in the region as part of a general resumption of a global role via the Middle East – considers every democratic transformation to

34 David D. Kirkpatrick, *Into the Hands of the Soldiers: Freedom and Chaos in Egypt and the Middle East* (New York: Viking, 2018).

35 Ben Rhodes, *The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House* (New York: Random House, 2018); Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic* (April 2016), accessed on 29/4/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2DbyDgY>; "Exclusive: President Barack Obama on 'Fox News Sunday,'" *Fox News*, April 10, 2016, accessed on 29/4/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2Z36odw>



be an expansion of Western influence and its model of government, as happened in Eastern Europe, and the sort of which they had narrowly managed to prevent in the former Soviet republics.

## 2) Exporting autocracy

Since the fall of Communism the only marketable global model for a system of government encompassing values and behaviours of governance has been democracy. Globally speaking, Russia and China no longer have models suitable for export. They are still afraid of democratic transformations, and lean towards autocratic regimes, with preference for nationalist demagogues, although not all the regimes they support are necessarily of this kind. There are considerations pertaining to influence (economic influence in the case of China), and others pertaining to strategic competition with the US, with a deep-seated conviction that any expansion of democracy means an expansion of Western influence. Russia has officially adopted a discourse that places Western traditions and values in opposition to Russian and “Eurasian” values and transnational liberalism in opposition to patriotism and nationalism. Putin has made the following comments about the revolutions that took place in parts of the Arab World and Eastern Europe:

‘There was a whole series of controlled “colour” revolutions. Clearly, the people in those nations, where these events took place, were sick of tyranny and poverty, of their lack of prospects; but these feelings were taken advantage of cynically. Standards were imposed on these nations that did not in any way correspond to their way of life, traditions, or these peoples’ cultures. As a result, instead of democracy and freedom, there was chaos, outbreaks in violence and a series of upheavals. The Arab Spring turned into the Arab Winter. A similar situation unfolded in Ukraine. In 2004, to push the necessary candidate through at the presidential elections, they [i.e. the West] thought up some sort of third round that was not stipulated by the law... We understand what is happening; we understand that these actions were aimed against Ukraine and Russia

and against Eurasian integration. And all this while Russia strived to engage in dialogue with our colleagues in the West.’<sup>(36)</sup>

Note that Putin brings together concerns relating to the struggle for influence in areas that he considers Russia’s sphere of influence with concerns of culture, using justifications that would once have been considered conservative and racist in Arab leftist circles (some of which now sympathise with Putin): the organic relationship between peoples’ cultural essence and the political systems appropriate to them.

Although regimes like those of Saudi Arabia and the Emirates on the one hand and Iran on the other have continued to exercise influence over their environment, they too now have a model for export. They have, however, exported a political culture of a specific kind, just as they have supported authoritarian regimes radically different from themselves, either for geostrategic reasons related to influence or to impede the spread of the democratic system for fear of its influence on them. Saudi Arabia has played a decisive role in stymieing democratic transformation in Yemen by imposing the Gulf Co-operation Council initiative and supporting non-democratic forces. Iran then played a role in preventing the implementation of the outcomes of national dialogue by supporting the Houthis after they took control of Sana’a on 21 September 2014, with Yemen quickly becoming the scene of a fierce regional war, with direct Saudi-Emirati intervention. The Iranian-Saudi conflict in Iraq likewise continues to impede the development of democracy, even after the move from supporting armed groups to supporting sectarian political forces in the Iraqi elections. This support increases influence and contributes to sectarian fragmentation and not to the spread of democratic values. The same applies to Lebanon.

Saudi and Emirati activity continues in Egypt, using financial support to consolidate the Sisi regime and buy newspapers and media institutions that then slander and blame the Arab revolutions for the crises in Syria, Yemen and Libya, absolving the Arab regimes of responsibility. They also support zealous Salafi political forces from the school that calls for obedience to the ruler and rejects intervention in politics, and any other political forces that support authoritarianism and reject democracy.

36 “Address by President of the Russian Federation: Vladimir Putin addressed State Duma Deputies, Federation Council Members, Heads of Russian Regions and Civil Society Representatives in the Kremlin,” The Kremlin, Moscow, March 18, 2014, accessed on 29/4/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/1U4FWps>

Autocracy has taken international and regional forms, and encompasses military support and commercial relations. Against the spread of studies regarding external support for democracy, the idea of ‘autocracy promotion’ has not enjoyed sufficient interest.<sup>(37)</sup> Studies appeared in the first decade of this century indicating that despotic or semi despotic rule was increasing, and likewise the possibilities of it exercising international influence. Among these reports are the latest annual surveys conducted by Freedom House on political rights and civil freedoms worldwide, as well as Robert Kagan’s book *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*<sup>(38)</sup>, which has been widely quoted in this field. Kagan identifies geostrategic competition between democratic and non-democratic and despotic regimes, especially with the end of the Cold War and the rise of non-democratic and despotic forces competing with liberal democracy.<sup>(39)</sup> Studies have also been published addressing specific cases, such as those which concentrate on the growth of Chinese soft power and the role of its political-economic model in attracting some developing countries<sup>(40)</sup>. Other studies have dealt with Putin’s interventions in Central Asia, Ukraine, Georgia and Belarus, and Russian attempts to undermine OSCE attempts to observe elections in Europe<sup>(41)</sup>. Syria and Ukraine might now be added to this list.

The Syrian case is of particular interest because Russian intervention there was direct, military, and decisively achieved its two aims: maintaining the Syrian

regime and increasing Russian influence in the Arab region. The slogan of the Russian intervention was preservation of national sovereignty against Western intervention conducted without the permission of the relevant despotic regimes, which of course welcomed Russian intervention in their favour. Here international legitimacy and the concept of sovereignty are invoked. The national sovereignty discourse is used to sanction the bloody doctrine that it is the right of any regime to do whatever it likes to its own people and to call for foreign intervention against democratic transformation, placing the international law protecting sovereignty in confrontation with that protecting civilian lives against war crimes and genocidal oppression.

As indicative examples of non-democratic regimes’ interventions to defend despotic rule, Burnell cites the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Commonwealth of Independent States, which was founded after the collapse of the Soviet Union and encompasses various post-Soviet Republics. These organisations have defended despotism by providing mutual support between these states. Burnell also points to China’s role in helping Saudi Arabia and Vietnam to block websites that they do not want their citizens reading.<sup>(42)</sup> China and Russia<sup>(43)</sup> have recently offered assistance to Saudi Arabia after the crisis caused by the assassination of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi (in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul on 2 October 2018), providing weapons and strengthening commercial relations with Saudi Arabia at a time when the campaign against Saudi human rights

37 Peter J. Burnell, “Promoting Democracy and Promoting Autocracy: Towards a Comparative Evaluation,” *Journal of Politics and Law*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2010), pp. 3-4, accessed on 29/4/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2QGKnfs>

38 Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2008).

39 Foreign Affairs has published many pessimistic articles on the future of democracy, but articles by Thomas Carothers and Richard Young and Thomas Carothers and Christopher Carothers point to more positive indicators in this respect: Thomas Carothers & Richard Youngs, “Democracy Is Not Dying,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 11, 2017, accessed on 29/4/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2GLrZyZ>; Thomas Carothers & Christopher Carothers, “The One Thing Modern Voters Hate Most Charges of Corruption are Toppling Leaders at a Growing Clip. That’s a Good Thing for Global Politics,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 24, 2018, accessed on 29/4/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2mKUgfn>

40 Naazneen Barma & Ely Ratner, “China’s Illiberal Challenge: The Real Threat Posed by China isn’t Economic or Military it’s Ideological,” *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*, no. 2 (Fall 2006), accessed on 29/4/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2KfhhKM>; Carola McGiffert (ed.), *Chinese Soft Power and Its Implications for the United States: Competition and Cooperation in the Developing World*, CSIS Report (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2009), accessed on 29/4/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2Q5Ycrd>

41 Thomas Ambrosio, *Authoritarian Backlash: Russian Resistance to Democratization in the Former Soviet Union* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009).

42 Burnell, p. 5.

43 Henry Foy, “Russia-Saudi Arabia rapprochement reshapes more than the oil market,” *Financial Times*, October 30, 2018, accessed on 6/5/2019, at: <https://on.ft.com/2J1oubb>; Richard Hall, “Jamal Khashoggi: Russia refuses to criticise Saudi Arabia in wake of journalist’s murder,” *The Independent*, October 23, 2018, accessed on 6/5/2019, at: <https://ind.pn/2DRI4CG>; “Putin says can’t justify spoiling Saudi ties over Khashoggi affair,” *Reuters*, October 18, 2018, accessed on 6/5/2019, at: <https://reut.rs/2LnTm7G>; “MbS to visit China seeking ‘greater development of Sino-Saudi relations,’” *The New Arab*, February 15, 2019, accessed on 6/5/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2WpxM3z>; Michael Standaert, “Saudi Arabia strikes \$10bn China deal,” *Al Jazeera*, February 22, 2019, accessed on 6/5/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2GZST6c>.

practices was at its height in the West – although this campaign has not affected the support provided by the Trump administration in any case.

Russia has advocated a doctrine adopted by the despotic regimes of the region, which can be summarised as the transformation of national sovereignty into a principle transcending all others in international politics. The concept of sovereignty has receded, with the sovereignty of state-including-people becoming limited to the sovereignty of the ruling regime – encompassing a regime's total freedom of action towards its people as an expression of that sovereignty. The people of a regime are that regime's concern alone. Foreign intervention is permissible if requested by the legitimate regime, i.e. the existing regime, which exercises sovereignty according to their definition. Likewise, Putin's model

of authoritarian autocracy in electoral clothing, and the expansion of the powers of a president surrounded by a loyal security and economic elite and capable of suppressing his opponents with the tools of the state, have become an attractive model for authoritarian rulers, and even certain elected leaders in recent democracies hungry for more power and for their rule to be extended indefinitely.

The expansion of right-wing nationalist populism opposed to liberal democracy in the US and Europe, which began on the eve of Trump's election, can no longer be ignored. Neither can the escalating influence of identity politics and cultural and ethnic politics, and its effect in promoting authoritarian regimes' self confidence in the Mashreq – especially that these forces make use of some of the favourite expressions of Arab despotic regimes.<sup>(44)</sup>

## Conclusion

In this paper I have shown the following:

1. It is not possible to ignore the international factor in its interactions with domestic context when toppling an authoritarian regime and beginning a process of democratic transformation.
2. Priority (generally) remains with internal factors, especially if no direct foreign military intervention takes place. Democratic transition is before all else an internal issue.
3. It is difficult for an international factor to prevent democratic transformation if a popular revolution happens, especially if there is agreement on the transformation between political elites.
4. There is a difference between the operation of the external factor on democratic transition and its operation in consolidating democracy.
5. The external factor may be decisive in case of the collapse of despotism in dependent states.
6. So-called 'global waves' of democracy are generally regional waves.
7. The US did not become a supporter of democracy and democratic transformation after the Cold War, but rather less concerned with protecting its authoritarian allies. The Trumpian articulation of this transformation is the demand for protection money.
8. In the case of the Arab region, the rules of the Cold War remain in play to a great extent in US policy.
9. Western countries place the continued flow of oil, the prevention of migration, the protection of Israel's security and the fight against terrorism

44 This has reached the point, for example, of Sisi defending the use of the death penalty against political opposition figures in Egypt by claiming that the death penalty is part of the 'culture of the Arab region'. In his response to a question on the human rights situation in Egypt at the end of the Arab-European Summit held in Sharm El Sheikh, Sisi said that 'in European countries the priority is to secure prosperity for their citizens, unlike the priorities in the Arab region, which are the preservation of the state from collapse and destruction, as you see in many of our neighbouring countries.' He added that 'you talk about the death penalty, and we recognise this. But I would ask you not to impose anything on us, because when a citizen is killed by the act of a terrorist, his family demand that he be punished. If we were to ask European states to reconsider themselves and to reconsider the death penalty, this would mean that we did not understand the situation in Europe,' continuing that 'you will not teach us our own humanity. We have our own humanity, and you have your humanity.' *Al-'Arabi al-Jadid*, 25/02/2019, accessed on 29/04/2019 at <http://bit.ly/2X7Tr0d>. Bashar al-Assad had previously stated in an interview with the Wall Street Journal at the beginning of 2011 that he looked at reform differently from the West, adding that 'The problem with the West is that they start with political reform going towards democracy. If you want to go towards democracy, the first thing is to involve the people in decision making, not to make it. It is not my democracy as a person; it is our democracy as a society. So how do you start? You start with creating dialogue. How do you create dialogue? We did not have private media in the past; we did not have internet or private universities, we did not have banks. Everything was controlled by the state. You cannot create the democracy that you are asking about in this way. You have different ways of creating democracy.'

See: "Interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2011, accessed on 29/4/2019, at: <https://on.wsj.com/2Kkk2L0>

above human rights and democracy in the Arab World, and have not yet been convinced of the importance of democracy in this regard due to its fear of the outcome of free elections on its own interests.

10. The less oil an Arab state passing through a democratic transformation produces, and the further it is from Israel, the greater its chances of neutralising attempts to block this transformation

from outside. The greater the geostrategic importance of an Arab country is, the more active the external factor in impeding democracy.

11. With the resumption of a global role by Russia and China, so does their influence that favours despotic regimes. In the absence of an exportable model, these two states use a rhetoric that intersects with the culture of the populist right in democratic states or those transitioning to democracy.

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