

Oil is the instigate of landscape change in the M.E.

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In trying to explain the recent drastic and dramatic regime, political and security changes in the Arab World from the perspective of the indirect impact of oil on the Arab political landscape, references in this article are derived from two main streams: That of Western meddling and the lack of economic and political development. And oil, which has been more than an economic instrument, since its discovery it has had the effect of inaugurating the era of modern Arab economic and political dependency on the West, protectionism, the Jihadists and the wars that took the lives of millions and de-stabilized the region. Oil is viewed by the West as a strategic commodity, and control of such a resource should not be left to the governments of the oil producing countries nor their supporting neighboring regimes.

Before proceeding with the state of affairs that provided the backbone for the current landscape of political and balance of power change, it is important to acknowledge the catalyst factor which is the understanding of the new reality in the Arab World and the Middle East at large.

The worldwide quest for democracy has had its historical and prominent challenge. It has entered a new phase with the large-scale utilization of the electronic media – particularly the TV, internet and cell phones. These amenities which are considered by this article as catalyst allow for extended public participation in any matters of general interest, particularly in political and socio-economic matters. The electronic media expedite the transmission of information, images, sound recordings and video footage all over the world, also into restricted areas. In this way much more public support is mustered for a particular cause, and the intensive use of such aides even have the potential to organize and inspire global movements.

When the organizing of participatory democratic movements is extensively driven by the use of electronic media such a system may be described as “e-democracy” that goes parallel or against the existing way of rule by the concerned political system. This term refers to the use of information technologies and communication technologies in the execution of political and governance objectives. Obviously, these facilities may also be used by dissident groups to exchange information and rally themselves for the promotion of one or other democratic cause.

In today’s integrated world, political and other activities in one part of the world often have ramifications far outside a particular region, often causing extensive international reaction to whatever happens in one or other country. This has again been proved in the case of the turmoil and revolts in various Arab countries. E-democracy makes it possible to organize international support for virtually any cause.

Globalization

It is very obvious that information technologies have a strong potential for the globalization of regional issues, among others, it is a strong catalyst for the process of democratization and change. The World e-Democracy Forum and with limited merit to its academic soundness has asserted the following on their website:

“The revolution in Egypt has proven, once again, that the Internet can change the world. After the election of Barack Obama and Ben Ali’s downfall in Tunisia, the resignation of

Hosni Mubarak provides a wealth of insights. First of all, it is no longer possible to cut off a country from the rest of the world. In the past, this could be done by closing the borders, cutting off the telecom system, and repression was carried out secretly. No regime had yet resorted to a complete shutdown of the Internet. Restrictions had been imposed in Burma, Iran, Nepal, and even in China, but Internet had never been blocked as such for more than eight days. Nevertheless, communication continued despite the Internet take-down, especially thanks to the role played by the multinational companies, as was the case with Google and Twitter, which launched the “speak-to-tweet” service. This service allowed anyone with a voice connection to dial an international number and have their voice messages sent out as tweets. The role of Facebook in by-passing the governmental censorship in Tunisia had already been the sign of the big role the actors of the Web could play in these events.”

In this article, the argument is that the uniformly authoritarian political climate of the Arab world is not solely, perhaps not even primarily, an outgrowth of indigenous social, cultural, or economic conditions in the region. While Islamic norms may strongly influence Arab conceptions of legitimate governance, they do not explain why corrupt, in-egalitarian, and decidedly un-Islamic regimes have managed to flout the rising popular will matching globalization process. Tribal and ethno-sectarian divisions have been exploited by Arab regimes to divide and rule their constituents, but the salience of primordial forms of identification is less a cause than an outgrowth of authoritarian governance. While abundant oil resources may weaken societal pressures for representation, many Arab states have little or no oil and petroleum wealth has not always decisively blocked transitions to democracy in other parts of the world. While further research into these and other factors may yet produce an explanatory breakthrough, underlying societal conditions have not been convincingly shown to account for the Arab "democracy deficit."

How, then, can one account for the fact that one or two by most of the 121 nations classified by Freedom House as electoral democracies are in the Arab world? Imagine a botanical experiment in which most of the seeds in one bed of soil sprout and grow into plants, while all of the seeds in a second bed either fail to sprout or quickly wither once they break the soil. One might begin by checking to see whether the seeds in the second group are defective or damaged. If close examination of the seeds reveals no identifiable characteristics that could plausibly account for such sweeping failure to develop, an astute botanist would likely proceed by determining whether differences in soil conditions, temperature, and sunlight account for the anomaly.

Most scholars of Arab politics have spent their time studying seeds. The proposition that authoritarianism in the Arab world is sustained by the absence or weakness of external forces that have facilitated democratization elsewhere has not been rigorously examined. In order to determine whether external conditions can account for the discrepancy, one must first establish whether governments in the Arab world have faced external conditions relevant to democratization that differ significantly from those faced by their counterparts elsewhere in the world. This study contends that they have.

Since the waning years of the Cold War, Western governments and international institutions have made the promotion of democracy abroad a key policy objective, particularly in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Africa. As a result, the post-Cold War political order has been quite inhospitable to regimes in most areas of the world that are branded by the West as having failed to embark (or remain) on the path toward democracy and the question here is

again why? In order to explicate on this matter researchers have to go back to the historical progression.

Historical Backbone Progression

The Western and Arab World mutual manipulation process historically reveals that only in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, Arab oil-producing countries used oil as an instrument of economic and diplomatic pressure on the West for a while. They decided to reduce their oil output and imposed embargoes on oil shipments to the US, Holland, Portugal and South Africa to force a change in their policy toward the Israeli occupation of Arab lands. They demanded a total withdrawal of Israel's military from all Arab territory occupied in the 1967 war and the restoration of the Palestinian's rights. President Nixon proclaimed the US full support of Israel and granted Israel \$2.2 billion in additional military assistance as a response to the Arab demands. The commitment of the Arab oil-producing countries to achieve political goals has faltered and lost credibility. They scaled down their demands in a December 8 of 1973 resolution by asking for only that the US guaranteed a promised phased Israeli withdrawal from the lands occupied in 1967. Then in March 1974, they decided to lift the embargo indefinitely without accomplishing any of their declared demands. Neither complete Israeli withdrawal nor restoration of Palestinian rights was achieved.

The industrial countries demand for Arab oil has increased significantly since 1973 and the US and western powers political and military actions in the Middle East suggest that oil has become a major factor in its policy formation. The US has strengthened its military, political and economic influence in its oil-producing protectorates and allies and created false pretexts to wage war against oil-rich Iraq in 2003. At the same time, the US has been strengthening Israel, its strategic ally and its supposedly military policeman in the region. With the rising demand for the Arab only commodity by the international community, Arab countries became peripheries for the industrial countries which purchase their crude oil and promise to defend their national boundaries and territorial integrity. Middle East oil has undermined Arab independence, created a consuming culture of imported luxury goods, limited the economies of the Arab oil producing countries and their neighboring Arab states, and undermined their political and social development.

Oil created the political economy of dependency in the Arab World; it rendered Arab states as a market for the military-industrial complex weapons that gave them false feeling of security. US officials declared in many occasions that military equipment sales to the Gulf States and even to Egypt serve the interest of Israel and the US. Arab nations that bought fighter airplanes had to abide by certain conditions that compromise their sovereignty over their own territories regarding the positioning and operation of the fighters. The US has the option of not providing spare parts should the buyers ignore the US stipulation. The AWACS intelligence-gathering airplanes that Saudi Arabia bought in the 1980s for six billion dollars had to be operated only by US personnel.

Another problem the Arab countries have to contend with in the post-oil-discovery period is the lack of industrial economy. A sustained competitive industrial development in the Arab world has lagged behind other developing countries. The most striking example is Egypt which had been the most developed Arab country since the nineteenth century. Forced peacetime industrialization in Egypt started in the first half of the nineteenth century when Muhammad Ali, the titular ruler of Egypt, tried to establish it as a powerful industrialized European-style state. Egypt had a college of engineering in early nineteenth century long time before India had a technical college, and Cairo University was officially established in 1908.

Industrialization is not a goal by itself, but it is a means for development that produces quality products demanded by the public at competitive price, provides employment to the work force and the necessary research facilities to continue productivity improvement. It requires planning, capital, trained labor, managerial skills, domestic and foreign markets, diversification as a means of compensating for the spent assets, and political stability for long-term industrial planning and for creating conditions conducive to attracting foreign investment.

The generations that governed Arab countries in the second-half of the last century were influenced by Pan-Arab nationalism, predisposed by oil and the establishment of Israel. The alliance between middle class socialists and military officers in Egypt, Syria and Iraq adopted the development of Third World socialist policies and the Soviet Union management style where the inefficient public sector rather than the private sector was entrusted to accomplish their goals. It produced import substitute products that were sold locally and exported only to the Communist oriented countries. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Arab products lost their markets in the Eastern block and could not establish markets in the West due to generally inferior quality of their goods. Arab regimes in these countries have rejected communism but failed to embrace real free-market economy in their major industries. Even the renowned Egyptian textile industry could not compete with the European and Japanese imports. Arab states failed to reform their industries including the agribusiness to meet the growing demand for food by their own people because of the structural constraints that had been inherited from their former centralized economy. Arab states are known for their burdensome bureaucracy, which controls many sectors of society and obstructs change and development.

The existing economic system in the Arab states can hardly be described as a model fit for the new capitalist world system. The actual investment in the nonoil producing states has been mostly for importing consumer goods including those sought by the returning expatriates, commissions and accumulating profit by few rather than productive enterprises that may contribute to any tangible industrialization effort. The lack of sound management led to the spread of corruption and increased the gap between the rich and the poor. As such it is important to focus on the political landscape and the recent Arab regime changes from the perspective of how external factors (Western meddling) and the pitiable socioeconomic conditions that have impacted it. One hypothesis being that the West's tendencies, due to their interest in Middle East oil, has been profoundly negative on political development, exacerbating the already deleterious effect that oil has had on the evolution of the political landscape in the Arab world. The other hypothesis being that oils' impact on the socioeconomic condition has affected the ability of Arab countries to evolve toward more representative government. This assertion is based on the assumption that the formation of so-called "civil society" and the establishment of a vibrant middle class are crucial links in political development. The lack of socioeconomic progress in the Middle East therefore, has impacted the political environment.

Western Meddling

It is rather a subjective exercise to distinguish between Western interventions in the political affairs of the Middle East as direct or indirect consequence of oil, and as such the meddling takes many forms but putting it simply it is a function of the West's preference for the roughshod tactics of Israel and the dictatorial Arab regimes, over the vulnerability and uncertainty associated with fledgling democratic governments. The West has historically provided little if any support for democratic movements as a function of their interest in Middle East oil and secondly why today after two decade of the end of the Cold War, the

US/West is still shy, reluctant, and not directly supportive of representative governance in the region.

The precedent for authoritarianism was established under the mandate system as the British and the French put local elites in power that would serve their interests and in turn would have the backing of the mandatory power. As time evolved several of the dependent regimes were overthrown by military coups bent on reversing what they saw as imposing rule. These martial regimes made matters worse in many respects by purging the only groups that had any knowledge on how to run a country, the ruling and economic elites. Shunning the West, they fell inexorably further away from the liberal political and economic framework established by the colonial powers. Rather than make attempts to stem this momentum, the West was seemingly only focused on their own short term concerns, rather than the long term stability and well being of the region.

Previously the Mandatory powers installed their own elites to run matters on their behalf. The two primary goals of these elites were to embellish their personal well being and secondly, serve the imperial powers in order to maintain their positions of authority. However, their sycophantic allegiance and ostentatious lifestyles did not reconcile the status of these ruling elites to the Arab populace. So while the skeletons of democratic institutions were in place, they often were dismissed as mere cover for the imperialistic designs of the mandatory powers. As a result, very little “state building” was accomplished and as the Second World War approached, the Arab mandates were not progressing toward self-rule, as was the theoretical intent behind the U.N. system. Again it should be stressed that the British and French were focused on their own short-term self-interests in which oil was at the top of the list. The principle as established under the Mandate that “the well-being and development of such people form a sacred trust to civilization”, was for the most part ignored. In the aftermath of WWII, the United States reined unmatched in global primacy while the British and French came out of the war exhausted, having little financial or psychological wherewithal to maintain their holdings in the Middle East. Like the US, the Soviet Union also emerged from the war as a new super power. It was the fear of an ever-stronger Soviet Union imposing its will on the Middle East and the associated “communist threat” that increasingly came to dominate the strategy of Western policy makers. The same that during the war had been a successful effort to keep the oil supplies out of the hands of the Nazis turned into a geo-strategic effort to keep many of those same supplies and the governments that controlled them, out of the sphere of Soviet influence. In the context of the Cold War, the US (and now to a far lesser extent Britain and France) felt they could not risk any destabilizing influences on their Middle East “friends” involved in the production or transportation of petroleum supplies. Most prominent of these potentially destabilizing influences were any Soviet supported groups in the region but also included Pan-Arab nationalist and/or even nascent democratic movements. Any influences perceived as destabilizing could in turn make these governments weaker and vulnerable to Soviet designs.

The Post Cold War era

For decades it was the existence of the Soviet threat to economic interests in the Middle East that ostensibly “prevented” the West from promoting democracy in the region. Yet in spite of the fall of the Soviet Union and the eastern bloc in the 1990 time frame, the US dominated Western alliance has since shown little inclination to begin promoting democracy in the region, Denoeux:

“They also continued to fear that US efforts to promote political liberalization could create a backlash and damage US interests in the area. Furthermore, the United States support for

authoritarian regimes had always had at least as much to do with Washington's concern for oil supplies and regional stability as with fear of Soviet influence; as a result, the collapse of the Soviet Union did little to justify a change in US policy toward these regimes." [Denoeux 1996, 10].

Five examples illustrate this reluctance, Kuwait, Algeria, Yemen, Iraq and Egypt. Algeria, with its close proximity to and affinity with France had moved agonizingly closer to liberal democracy for decades culminating with the call for unprecedented free elections in 1991. Realizing the West's worst fears however, the first round of voting catapulted the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) into political prominence. The subsequent cancellation of the results, the second round of elections and the military coup that followed, brought something more akin to sighs of relief than indignation from the West. This in spite of the bloodbath congregated upon the Algerian people by the low-level civil war between the jilted factions and the army ever since.

Washington did little to support Yemen's brave attempt to democratize in 1994. They, like Kuwait lying contiguous to the King Pin Saudi Arabia, could expect no support from the US as put by Denoeux: "Administration officials at times appeared concerned that Yemen's example might inspire others in the Arabian Peninsula to call for greater pluralism" [Denoeux 1996, 21].

And finally it is worth mentioning that even in Egypt the second largest recipient of US aid, there was virtually a shy US government pressure on Egypt to enact political reforms before the recent young uprising that led to the fall down of the Mubarak's regime. While there are dozens of NGO's theoretically working to this end, Hosni Mubarak has been president from 1981 to February 2011, maintaining all through control over a sham parliament dominated by his own party apparatus and every indication is, that he was grooming his son to succeed him.

As is apparent, as a function of America's interest in maintaining the status quo in the Middle East (i.e. cheap, abundant, reliable oil supplies), it is not an exaggeration to suggest that the US (and to a lesser extent Western Europe), more than two decades in the shadow of the Cold War, did not directly support Arab democracy in any meaningful way. Denoeux talks to the general sentiment among American administration officials. "In general, decision-makers have been haunted by the prospect of widespread domestic turmoil in an area that is of vital strategic and economic importance to the United States. This apprehension explains their unwillingness to engage in policy initiatives, such as assistance to democratic forces, that might disrupt the region's precarious political balance, destabilize vital allies, and compromise access to oil supplies" [Denoeux, 1996, 4].

Current Rational for the lack of direct support for democracy by the West

While historically, especially in the context of the Cold war, the West has worked as Chomsky puts it "to deter democracy"; even today they do not seem intent on changing their policy. There are at least four reasons for the US/West's current apprehension regarding the lack of support for democracy in the region. First, there is the general perception regarding the inability of these countries to embrace pluralistic rule as a function of the tenuous state of civil society in the Arab world. Second, the existence of an overwhelming current of anti-American sentiment amongst the masses, emanating primarily from the US' support for the perceived anti-Arab policies of Israel and America's partnerships with the "friendly" Arab authoritarians. Thirdly, an outgrowth of the fear that radical Islamists would come to power

if free elections were held. And fourthly, the fact that America's closest ally in the region, Israel, does not see great benefit to their role in the Middle East if Arab countries adopted democracy.

Lack of Civil Society

Suffice to say that civil society is a "Catch 22" issue for the Arabs. (Catch 22 is a situation in which a desired outcome or solution is impossible to attain because of a set of inherently illogical rules). It expands to the extent that government policy allows for it to do so. Its current stunted nature in Arab society is therefore greatly attributable to the existence of authoritarian governments who prevent civil society from germinating. Institutions of public discourse it is feared, would threaten their grip on power. Ironically then, authoritarianism has mitigated the growth in civil society, yet it is this very lack of civil society that then inhibits the Arab's ability to be stable, democratic states. The West in turn then feels it is unwise to support movement toward democracy due to the lack of civil society not seemingly recognizing the "Catch 22" inherent in their policy. Civil society has been and it will remain repressed for lack of indigenous funding and the Arabs will stay vulnerable to destabilizing forces, from the Soviet meddling during the Cold War era to the Islamic radicalism today.

Support for Israel and Anti American Sentiment

American policies in the Middle East, primarily since the 1967 Arab Israeli war, have engendered deep feelings of animosity amongst the Arab masses. It is a fear of an unleashing of this sentiment manifest in the election of anti-American leaders that is the second reason inhibiting the US/West from actively supporting democracy today in the Arab world. These feelings emanate from three primary sources. First, American unquestioning support for what is perceived as Israeli rough treatment against Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular. Second, it is a demotion as a function of American support for the many "friendly" regimes to the West who are seen as despotic and illegitimate by their own people. And thirdly, it is the perceived hypocrisy of American rhetoric regarding freedom, justice and democracy all the while supporting Israel and their Arab friends who are seen as making a mockery of such concepts.

America's decades long support for Israeli practices is the most significant source of anti-American feelings in the Arab world. This support has gone through several phases reaching its zenith during the height of the Cold War and the fall of the Shah of Iran.

Phase two began shortly thereafter with the advent of the Cold War culminating the overwhelming Israeli victory in the Six Day War of June 1967. While the French were their main backers up to that time, Israel had demonstrated on this and several other occasions a military capability that was more than impressive to both the US State Department and the Pentagon. They were increasingly seen by America as an ally not only able to deter Soviet expansionism but also able to blunt upstart Arab nationalists like Egypt's Nasser, who it was felt could destabilize the region as commented on by Chomsky: "From the late 1950's however, the US government increasingly came to accept the Israeli thesis that a powerful Israel is a 'strategic asset' for the United States, serving as a barrier against indigenous radical nationalist threats to American interests, which might gain support from the USSR" [Chomsky 1999, 20].

Phase three of the Western support for Israel (1967 –1990) came to be completely dominated by the US, as Israel quickly became the largest recipient of US aid and unwavering political backing. It was during this period that comprehensive American

support reached its apex as the magnitude of the Israeli lobbying efforts converged with the genuine perception of Israel as strategic asset. Two events in this time frame further augmented this synergy between domestic politics and actual need, the Vietnam War and the fall of the Shah of Iran. [Chomsky 1992, 208].

Israel's support from the US was not only economic, military and political but was at levels unmatched in the annals of modern history. Israel has consistently received at least one fourth of all US international aid since 1967 and in total has received more aid than was given to all of Europe under the Marshall Plan, in excess of \$100B 1997 dollars. They were, as the argument went, performing an essential function for the West, primarily the US. This purported function included: [Bill and Springborg 1994, 362].

- Blunting the aspirations of Arab nationalists like Nasser, Saddam or Islamic threats like Khomeini.
- Using the threat of force to keep any revolutionary regimes from threatening “friendly” countries; readily those that sell the West cheap oil.
- Providing a credible military threat to Soviet aspirations.

The current phase, (1990 – today), has now existed for over two decades and started with the end of the Cold War and is now witnessing a diversion. There are still remnants of the guilt/sympathy syndrome and their perceived value as “strategic asset” yet support for Israel today is predominantly a function of domestic political considerations. This is so because not only is the Soviet threat gone, but in the aftermath of the Gulf War the US/West was able to establish a direct presence in the oil rich Persian/Arabian Gulf. Thus with the US/West not having to rely on surrogates to the extent it once did, Israel it could be argued, had now become a strategic liability. Their policies of occupation and conflict with the Palestinians national aspirations, while once seen as a necessary evil by the US, may now be viewed as contributing to radicalism and a generally destabilizing force in the countries that America calls friends. Having said this however, American posture vis-à-vis Israeli practices on the ground have changed little. This is a tribute to the extent to which domestic politics can influence foreign policy. Pro-Israel political forces have simply garnered so much aptitude and momentum over the past five decades that virtually no politician can get elected or stay elected unless they pledge and demonstrate unconditional support for Israel, irrespective of its impact on American interests. [See Ball 1992]

While American support for Israel is today overwhelmingly a function of the power of the Israeli lobby, it was the perceived threat to US oil interests in the Middle East that provided the initial impetus for this support so masterfully capitalized upon by Israeli supporters in the US. Whatever the justification for the support, it has contributed mightily to anti-American feelings, and these feelings in turn are seen as a reason that the US cannot support democracy in the Arab world.

Support for repressive regimes

The second source of anti-American sentiment in the Arab world stems from the perception amongst the masses that the US supports their own repressive governments as long as these governments continue to serve Western oil related interests. In addition to the distress of living in police states, these feelings of resentment are magnified as a function of the failed nature of these regimes based on virtually any standard of measurement; the lack of economic or social development, political impotence in regional affairs and military vulnerability.

Be it Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Algeria, even Iraq as Chomsky comments:

“...prior to Hussein’s attack on Kuwait the Bush administration and its predecessors treated Saddam as an amiable friend, yet encouraging trade with his regime and credits to enable it to purchase US goods” Irrespective of their record on human rights, lack of representative governance or the larceny of their national treasuries, the US is seen as abetting these regimes in their abuses of power (much in the way the Iranians saw it as it related to the Shah). The general perception being that the US is not concerned with what the rulers do within the confines of their own borders as long as they respect internationally accepted norms of behavior (outside those borders) and do not show undue hostility to American interests. [Chomsky 1992 194].

Depending on the circumstances therefore, the US would at best ignore their transgressions or at worst, support them outright. The list of abuses and even atrocities carried out by America’s “friends” are the subject of innumerable articles and books but the issue here is not the repression itself, rather the perceived US/Western culpability in it. (It can be argued that Arab leaders have killed many more of their own people than has outsiders in all wars.)

Western Hypocrisy

As a function of the many ills that plague Arab society then, a traumatized Arab citizen looks on with bewilderment at American and western policies for the region. A country that purports to stand for “liberty and justice for all”, yet seemingly ignores such principles in their acquiescence and support of Israeli actions against “uncooperative” Arabs. To add insult to injury, America is seen as embracing authoritarian regimes (including their own) if they are friendly to the West yet decry the excesses of others dictators who are not in the Western camp. Accordingly, the selectively employed American rhetoric about freedom and democracy rings very hollow to people often living miserable existences because of their lack of such liberties. The hypocrisy of American rhetoric only adds fuel to the anti-American feelings in the region.

Therefore deeply rooted feelings of animosity, inherent in the average Arab citizen and directed at the West in general and the US in particular is the second of four reasons the US/West is now reluctant to show decisiveness to promote democracy in the Arab world summed up by Denoex as follows: “...both Republican and Democratic administrations have been prompt to realize that, from Washington’s perspective, authoritarian leaders actually are more likely to accommodate American interests than governments, which if they were accountable to public opinion, would inevitably be influenced by strong anti-American feelings that exist in the region as discussed above” [Denoex 1996, 4].

The Islamist threat

The third reason Americans are reluctant to support democracy in the Arab world is nonetheless related to the fear that not only would freely elected governments be anti-American but they would very likely be Islamic fundamentalists to one degree or another. The stifling of political opposition in the Arab world has left the unabashedly anti-American Islamists as the most viable alternative to the existing, discredited regimes. As the most organized opposition, free election in most Arab countries today would undoubtedly have Islamists garnering a large percentage of the vote. This is not necessarily because people desire a Shari’a based Islamic state but because they want drastic change and the Islamists appear to be the most credible and least corruptible catalyst for this change. Perhaps the most important change desired is to get away from those governments whose primary focus has been to serve Western interests in order to embellish themselves. America and the West fear that the events that transpired in Iran during the 1979 revolution are indicative of what

could also occur on the Arab side of the Gulf. Not only would the Islamists be anti-American but they could also end up being anti-democratic. The fear being that the Islamists would use the election to come to power and then revert to some form of authoritarianism.

As in the case of civil society, it can also be argued that Islamic militancy is an outgrowth of the American supported authoritarian nature of the Arab governments, yet it has now replaced communism as the primary “threat” to American interests. American support for Iraq in their war with Iran (1980-1988) reflected America’s obsessive fear of Islamic fundamentalism, and its belief that relying on dictators even tyrants such as Saddam was appropriate to prevent this revolution from spreading to the Arab world.

Thus, even when American policy-makers felt qualms about supporting authoritarian monarchies and turning a blind eye to the dismal human rights record of dictatorial regimes, their reservations were soon overcome by the realization that it was far easier for Washington to deal with an Arab world dominated by kings, emirs, and dictators, than with a region made unmanageable by the unleashing of religious fervor, nationalist passions, anti-Israeli zeal, and long-accumulated social, political, and economic frustrations [Denoeux 1996, 9].

Even today in the aftermath of the Cold War and the loss of the communist threat, the US is still fearful of democracy in the Middle East and not only provides it little guidance or support but is effectively an enabler of authoritarianism in the region. This fear was born out based on the experience of the Iranian revolution and elections in Algeria in 1991. The vicious cycle is then complete as it is these feelings that then become the justification inhibiting the US from supporting reforms, which in turn only garners more resentment; a cycle that has continued to spiral downward for decades.

Israel does not want Arab democracy

The fourth reason that there is little support for Arab democracy by the US/West is that Israel does not see a significant benefit to them. This is relevant because American Middle Eastern policy is highly subject to Israeli concurrence for several reasons. One, they believe the Israelis are experts on the issues of the region; two, they have served well in their capacity as a mercenary state and most importantly; three, domestic political considerations dictate that American politicians serve Israeli interests. As such the American lack of support for democracy stems in part from the fact that Israel does not welcome the prospect of liberalization in the Arab world. This is the Israeli attitude and for at least three reasons.

The first reason, that Israel does not welcome Arab democracy is that while the prospect of anti-American governments getting elected it is likely to be adamantly anti-Israeli. This is especially so while a peace treaty remains elusive in the context of the occupation of Arab land and the on-going abuse of the Palestinians. Freely elected representatives would reflect the general disdain the masses feel towards Israel.

The second reason Israel does not welcome democracy is that they would lose much of their moral legitimacy as it relates to what they often tout as the “only democracy in the Middle East”. A third reason Israel would not welcome political and economic liberalization is that it would enable the Arabs to better compete with Israel at all levels. Elected governments would in theory better serve the collective well-being, which would contribute to greater political, economic and military unity while producing more viable private sectors. Such

measures would enable the Arabs to compete with Israel on more equal footing.

Thus for the reasons stated above it can be argued that Israel is in no hurry to see democracy come to the region. And one other reason not mentioned regards their aid package. It is questionable that Israel could continue to justify their enormous levels of assistance, if they were merely one of many democracies in the region. Their *raison d'être*, the “protection” of American interests will have been greatly diminished. Thus, not only might they use their own means to undermine reforms directly, but it could also be argued that they would use their formidable influence in Washington to do the same under the guise that liberalization will lead to destabilization at the hands of radicals. Israel and their lobby leverage for that to the US/West.

Dependency

Dependence according to Dos Santos is a situation in which one economy is conditioned by the development and expansion of another. Of course in the modern world of globalization, every economy is to a certain degree dependent on many others. This then becomes a discussion about relative dependence and how this impacts a nation's ability to maneuver politically. Something that is hard to quantify but one can draw their own conclusions regarding the Arab world's dependence on the industrialized world and the West in particular. At a rudimentary level of analysis it would be accurate to suggest that if it were not for imports, especially anything having to do with advanced technology, most of the countries in the Arab world would cease to function almost instantaneously.

Economic considerations

In an economic sense the Arab states demonstrate an overwhelming dependency on the industrialized world, fed and exacerbated by oil rents. This dependency on outsiders began in earnest during the inter-war mandate period in which the British and French exerted full economic and political control over the region. The exploration for oil, which spurred huge investments completed and deepened this dependency as economic linkages were established with the industrialized world rather than between the Arab states themselves. Alnasrawi [1991, 106] discusses how the rise in oil revenues resulting from the large increases in price after the 1973 Arab-Israeli war had the effect of deepening this dependency on the West along several distinct lines.

First, oil came to predominate as means of economic viability at the expense of other sectors of their economies (Dutch Disease), including agriculture and industrial output of even the most rudimentary kind. With little local production virtually all items of a technological nature had to be imported, effectively an exchange of petrodollars for the instruments of modern living. The economies became slaves to the price of oil. The higher the price of a barrel of oil, the more imports of goods and services they could afford. Bill and Springborg comment: “By the early 1980's some two-thirds of imports were industrial goods, indicating that the Middle East is overwhelmingly a consumer rather than a producer of new technologies. This tendency was exacerbated by the oil boom” [Bill and Springborg 1994, 421].

Yet even prior to the oil boom levels of dependency, the oil producers were fully addicted to imports to survive. The best example of which was the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, in which the oil producers instituted a “boycott” against the US/West in support of Pan Arab political goals vis-à-vis the US backed Israeli occupation of Arab land. Even under these, the most favorable conditions to restrict trade, the Saudi led producers were not able or willing to

sustain their oil boycott for much more than a month. Alnasrawi discusses this pre-oil boom level of dependency.

The failure of the Arab oil weapon was inevitable, given the nature of the dependency of individual economies on the oil sector and the broader pattern of security, political, economic, and cultural dependence of the individual countries especially on the United States. The multiple dependency linkages in virtually every facet of interaction between the Arab countries and the United States mitigated any genuinely independent action by Arab governments. Arab governments were not only incapable of acting against United States interests, but they were unwilling to do so, given the long history of close alliance between Arab ruling elites on the one hand and the United States government on the other [Alnasrawi 1991, 109]. Economists argue that 1973 represented an era in which the oil producers were much less dependent on the West than they are today.

The second level of dependency stems from the influx of millions of Arab workers into the oil producing states, which entailed the transfer of billions of dollars back to the labor exporting countries. These remittances created a derivative or secondary dependence on oil related transfers to the non-oil states. They became dependent on the oil producers to provide work for their citizens, the associated remittances themselves and on the industrialized nations for the imports that were purchased with these remittances. However, this dependency made the labor exporting countries highly vulnerable to restrictions in employment levels by the host country. One excellent example for that occurred in the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and is taking place now in Libya. The Saudis not liking the response of the Yemeni government to Iraqi actions expelled half a million Yemeni workers from the Kingdom. Being one of the poorest of the poor, the Yemeni economy was incapable of absorbing these workers. Yemen and the other relatively poor Arab countries became even less well off having to borrow to replace the remittances. (After the war, the Kuwaitis summarily expelled 400,000 Palestinian.)

A third dimension of dependency has to do with the investment of petrodollars in Western financial markets. Such a practice put these funds at the mercy of the economic vitality of these countries and of course keeps these funds out of the local economies. If for example inflation was high, as it was in the late 1970's in the US, the value of these investments could and did decline precipitously. In addition these assets are vulnerable to the political whims of the Western government who can freeze them in the event a state is deemed to be behaving improperly, (e.g. Iran, Libya and Iraq). It thus limits the political and/or military options of the various states. Alnasrawi summarizes: "It should be clear from this outline that far from attaining its political objectives or even enhancing political and economic independence, the oil price revolution seems to have increased the links between oil-producing countries and the industrialized countries with the consequent rise in their dependency on the West [Alnasrawi 1991, 107].

Economic dependency of course translates into political vulnerability, which in turn decreases a states influence and ability to deal with others on equal footing. Thus oils contribution to the "hydrocarbon centric society" has created a state of political impotence vis-à-vis the West. The Arab regimes, especially the oil producers of the Gulf, are therefore extremely limited in their ability to act independently of US/Western wishes.

Attempts at Liberalization

Economic liberalization in the Arab world is inversely proportional to the level of oil rents

available to the regimes on a per capita basis. It is no coincidence that the largest country, Egypt is at the vanguard of such reforms after the recent mass revolution. The negative correlation between oil wealth and the rate of liberalization is further evidenced by the economic and political reforms of such countries as Turkey, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia after the fall down of the regime.

The oil producers have only entertained the need to liberalize their economies when the price of oil had gone so low as to force them to think of new ways to raise revenues and/or reduce spending. Each time (low) prices provided the impetus to initiate movement in that direction however, threats to the regimes stability had them backsliding, reverting to borrowing to buy time for prices to rebound as was evidenced after the Iraq conflict. “With the upturn in prices and demand following the second Gulf war, those states rushed to abandon policies of austerity and resume the previous pattern of generous allocations” [Bill and Springborg, 432].

Generally the term economic reform or liberalization entails some combination of currency devaluation to stimulate exports, reduction of subsidies on consumer goods, more effective taxation systems, privatizations of national industries, reducing spending on defense and government employment, expanding the role of capital markets to provide funds for investment and the lifting of restrictions on markets for goods and services. Such reforms have advanced slowly in the non-oil states but have made virtually no progress in the oil producers.

The above is manifested in the wake of the events in Tunisia and Egypt, when EU leaders rushed to make declarations whose common denominator was the need for policy change. Beyond extending emergency humanitarian aid, EU leaders decided at a March 13 emergency session on a comprehensive review of existing cooperative and assistance programs with the region’s states. In the mid-term, the EU intends to establish a new partnership with the nations of the southern Mediterranean called Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity. The foundation of the partnership consists of giving assistance and incentives to those states choosing to work towards political and economic reforms. The intention is to have concrete proposals formulated by April 2011, when a comprehensive examination of the ENP will take place.

Alongside the efforts to cope with the implications of its policy changes, the EU is also forced to reckon with the bloodshed in Libya in light of the Libyan ruler’s refusal to cede his power. The inability to make a decision on how to handle the refugees knocking at its doors, the difficulty of reaching a quick agreement on imposing sanctions on Qaddafi’s regime, Sarkozy’s decision, taken without prior coordination with his EU colleagues, to recognize the Libyan Revolutionary Council as the legitimate representative of Libya, and the willingness by Sarkozy (and Britain's Prime Minister Cameron) to consider military action are expressions of the inherent difficulty of EU states to formulate a shared foreign affairs and security policy. It seems that national interests will continue (despite the unfounded hopes that the Lisbon Treaty would change the rules of the game) to guide the conduct of the large states, at least for the foreseeable future. It is doubtful that this is enough to position the EU as a serious player in the global arena.

The transformation that the EU’s southern neighbors will undergo in the coming decades presents the EU with an historic challenge that demands – if the EU is truly serious – resources far beyond what it has allocated to date and a change in the patterns of cooperation that have been the norm, at the expense of interests it has so far been unwilling to forfeit. To this end, the EU must be prepared to act in a completely new way. Can the EU,

which is undergoing its own economic-financial crisis whose end is not in sight, rally to the task of assisting its neighbors to create conditions that, allow the establishment of democratic regimes? Only time will tell.

Conclusion

There exists strong evidence that Western meddling, as a function of their interest in protecting their hegemony over Arab oil, has reinforced the authoritarian nature of the regimes in the Arab world. The US/West has not supported democratic initiatives in any meaningful way for four primary reasons; 1) the Arab states lack of civil society necessary to sustain pluralistic government; 2) the strong anti-American feelings that exist among the masses would usher in anti-American governments; 3) the fear that radical Islamists would prevail in the event free elections were held and 4) America's ally Israel does not benefit from political liberalization in the region. Simply stated, as it relates to America's strategic interests, they preferred to deal with the perceived stability of authoritarian regimes versus the potential repercussions that political liberalization might portend however at this point of time in the Arab turmoil they are studying the different alternatives of practical foreign policies. It is worth mentioning that the socioeconomic condition that prevails in the Arab world has impacted their global political status as a function of their economic and military dependency on the US/West. This heavy level of dependency in turn makes these regimes highly vulnerable to US/Western political demands.

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النفط: العنصر المحرض للتغيير في الشرق الأوسط أ.د. ميشال نعمة

يحاول الباحث في دراسته تفسير تغييرات الأنظمة من الناحية السياسية والأمنية في العالم العربي من منظار التأثير غير المباشر للنفط على المشهد السياسي العربي .
تتبع هذه المطالعة من فكرتين أساسيتين: الأولى التدخل الغربي والثانية الافتقار إلى الانماء الاقتصادي والسياسي.
النفط هو أكثر من أداة اقتصادية ولكن منذ اكتشافه، لديه القدرة على افتتاح عصر الاعتماد العربي السياسي الحديث والاقتصادي على الغرب وتزايد الحماية (الغرب/العرب). كما أن الحروب والجهادية أدت إلى قتل مئات الملايين من الأشخاص وأنتجت نوعاً من الاهتزاز في المنطقة.

يعتبر الغرب أن النفط يجب ألا يكون بين أيدي الحكومات المنتجة للنفط أو بدعم من الأنظمة المجاورة ويركز الباحث على فكرة أن الذكاء الاقتصادي أصبح رهاناً للدولة.
يتطرق الباحث في دراسته إلى الحالة التي تزود الأساس للمشهد الحالي للتغير السياسي في ميزان القوى.