Backgrounder

Championing Liberty Abroad to Counter Islamist Extremism

Lisa Curtis

Abstract: *Promoting democracy and liberty around the world has long been a core component of U.S. foreign policy. After its initial efforts to distance itself from the Bush Administration's policies, the Obama Administration seems to be reaffirming the U.S. commitment to supporting democratic ideals and institutions around the globe. Such efforts are particularly important in Muslim-majority countries because the principles of liberal democratic governance are a powerful antidote to Islamist extremists' message of intolerance, hatred, and repression. The Obama Administration needs to prioritize the promotion of democracy and individual freedom both to extend the blessings of freedom to other countries and to protect U.S. national security.*

The Obama Administration initially sought to distance itself from the Bush Administration's policy of democracy promotion, particularly in the Middle East. President Barack Obama's reluctance to discuss the role of the U.S. in championing democratic values abroad raised concerns that he was reversing the decades-old bipartisan policy of promoting and defending such concepts as a core component of U.S. foreign policy.

Some of these concerns have been dispelled by recent speeches to the international community in which Obama and senior Cabinet officials expressed commitment to human rights and by the Administration's support for funding democracy-related programs that promote rule of law, accountability, anti-

Talking Points

- The Obama Administration needs to be more assertive in supporting democratic freedoms, especially in Muslim-majority countries. Promotion of individual liberty and religious freedom should be a key part of U.S. efforts to fight extremism and terrorism.

- In championing democratic values, the U.S. would not only adhere to its founding principles and help to secure freedom for others, but also protect its national security by uprooting support for extremist ideologies that lead to global terrorism.

- The fight against extremism is largely an ideological battle, and the principles of democratic governance and rule by the people are a powerful antidote to Islamist extremists' message of intolerance, hatred, and repression.

- The outcome of the protests against authoritarian rule in Egypt could profoundly affect Islamist movements throughout the Muslim world and support for al-Qaeda and its agenda. The U.S. needs to promote democracy while guarding against abrupt political changes that Islamists could exploit.

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corruption efforts, and democratic processes at the grass roots of societies.

The Obama Administration needs to continue its new-found commitment to supporting democratic ideals and institutions around the globe, especially in Muslim-majority countries where extremist movements threaten liberal freedoms and, in some cases, the stability of the state.

Encouraging democratic values will not only help to protect citizens from human rights abuses by authoritarian regimes, but also provide a bulwark against Islamist extremist movements. Part of the effort to counter extremist ideology will necessarily include demonstrating that Muslim-majority countries and democratic principles are compatible. The strategy should also involve countering Islamists, who may not publicly support terrorism but still seek to subvert democratic systems and pursue an ideology that leads to discrimination against religious minorities.

The wave of protests against authoritarian rule currently sweeping the Middle East is forcing the Obama Administration to make tough decisions on how the U.S. will promote democracy and concepts of liberty while guarding against the possibility of abrupt political changes that anti-American Islamists can exploit to their advantage. The stakes could not be higher for U.S. interests, especially since the outcome of the current wave of unrest could profoundly affect both Islamist movements throughout the Muslim world and support for al-Qaeda and its terrorist agenda.

An Enduring Commitment

The concept of promoting democratic ideals and institutions in other countries as a basis of U.S. foreign policy has deep roots. As Matthew Spalding describes in *We Still Hold These Truths*, the American Founders' interest in preventing any one power from dominating Europe and thus threatening the independence of the newly established United

States of America led them to develop a "prudent" foreign policy that was both practical and principled. He argues that America's founding principles compel it to be an advocate for freedom in the world and that promoting freedom abroad "has been and should always be a predominant theme of American foreign policy."[1]

In 1948, following World War II, the U.S. led the effort in the U.N. General Assembly to adopt the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which declares, "Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his [or her] country, directly or through freely chosen representatives…. The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government."[2] Aside from pushing for the U.N. declaration, much of U.S. support for international democratic movements in the 1950s and 1960s was through covert assistance, particularly to newspapers and parties under pressure in Europe.[3] The Johnson Administration recommended establishing "a public–private mechanism" to fund overseas activities promoting democracy more openly and transparently.

In the 1970s under President Jimmy Carter, U.S. government efforts to promote democratic values became more institutionalized through the establishment of the Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. The bureau was intended to allow the U.S. to maintain a consistent focus on issues related to democracy, human rights, and governance in its foreign relations, in addition to strategic and geopolitical priorities.

In his famous 1983 speech at Westminster, President Ronald Reagan broadened the emphasis of U.S. efforts from protection of individual liberties to a commitment to fostering the development of democratic systems.[4] To realize this objective, Reagan stood up the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a private, nonprofit foundation funded through annual U.S. congressional appropriations. The NED makes hundreds of grants each year to support pro-democracy groups overseas.

1. Matthew Spalding, *We Still Hold These Truths: Rediscovering Our Principles, Reclaiming Our Future* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2009), pp. 165–181.
2. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, art. 21.
3. David Lowe, "Idea to Reality: NED at 25," National Endowment for Democracy, at *http://www.ned.org/about/history* (February 7, 2011).

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Through the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, Congress strengthened U.S. commitment to advancing universal human rights, particularly with regard to freedom of worship and religious conscience. The act established the Office of International Religious Freedom within the State Department, headed by an ambassador-at-large, and mandated that the State Department prepare

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annual reports that would single out countries that violate religious freedom standards. The legislation also established the bipartisan U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) to monitor trends, developments, and government policies in religious freedom around the world.

President George W. Bush prioritized democracy building in the Middle East by establishing the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) in 2002. The MEPI is aimed at strengthening civil society and rule of law, empowering women and youth, improving and expanding education, encouraging economic reform, and increasing political participation through direct aid to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), educational institutions, local governments, and private businesses. As of 2009, MEPI had awarded roughly $530 million in grants to more than 600 projects in 17 countries.

"Democracy Needs Defending"

President Obama's initial unwillingness to make a strong public commitment to the multi-decade U.S. tradition of advancing human rights and democracy sent a negative signal to supporters of democracy across the globe, especially those risking their lives for the cause. U.S. academics noted that Obama surprisingly did not mention the issue during his presidential inaugural address and worried that the Administration would pull back on democracy promotion as part of a broader foreign policy.[5] These observers noted that Obama's cautiousness may have stemmed from his desire to clearly dissociate his policies from Bush's policies in Iraq, which had relied in part on the promotion of democracy in the Middle East as justification for regime change.

The National Security Strategy published in May 2010 officially confirmed a gradual turnaround in the Administration's approach: "The United States supports the expansion of democracy and human rights abroad because governments that respect these values are more just, peaceful, and legitimate."[6] In his speech to the U.N. General Assembly on September 23, 2010, President Obama reiterated this commitment:

> [E]xperience shows us that history is on the side of liberty; that the strongest foundation for human progress lies in open economies, open societies, and open governments.… [D]emocracy, more than any other form of government, delivers for our citizens.…
>
> …America will always extend our engagement abroad with citizens beyond the halls of government.… And it is time to embrace and effectively monitor norms that advance the rights of civil society and guarantee its expansion within and across borders.[7]

Similarly, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in a speech at the Council on Foreign Relations on

4. Ken Wollack, remarks at "U.S. Democracy Policy Under Obama: Rebalancing or Retreat?" event sponsored by Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Brussels, October 12, 2010, at *http://www.carnegieendowment.org/events/index.cfm?fa=eventDetail&id=3030* (January 31, 2011).

5. Thomas Carothers, "Democracy Promotion Under Obama: Finding a Way Forward," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace *Policy Brief* No. 77, February 2009, at *http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/democracy_promotion_obama.pdf* (January 31, 2011).

6. The White House, *National Security Strategy*, May 2010, p. 37, at *http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf* (January 31, 2011).

7. Barack Obama, remarks to the U.N. General Assembly, September 23, 2010, at *http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/09/23/remarks-president-united-nations-general-assembly* (January 31, 2011).

September 8, 2010, emphasized that the U.S. had a unique responsibility to champion democratic values throughout the world. She talked about the need to construct an international "architecture of values" to counter repression and extend freedom and emphasized the need to challenge authoritarianism that stymies civil society and pluralism, stating succinctly that "[d]emocracy needs defending."[8]

Obama's pronouncements on democracy in his U.N. speech prompted conservative columnist Robert Kagan to declare, "Democracy is back. A year ago, who would have believed that Obama would devote almost a third of his speech at the United Nations to democracy?"[9]

According to President Obama, "experience shows us that history is on the side of liberty; that the strongest foundation for human progress lies in open economies, open societies, and open governments."

International Republican Institute President Lorne Craner, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor in the George W. Bush Administration, testified to Congress in June 2010 that the Administration had recently begun to adopt a more proactive policy toward democracy promotion during its second year in office. Craner pointed to President Obama's reticence on the Iranian democracy protests of July 2009 and the "conspicuously absent D" from the Obama foreign policy agenda—which highlighted diplomacy, development, and defense but down-

played democracy—as examples of the Administration's lack of attention to democracy promotion during its first year. Craner said that the Administration, after more than a year of near-silence on the issue, was in the beginning stages of developing a democracy policy.[10]

Prioritizing Democracy in the Foreign Aid Budget

Despite the Administration's initial reluctance to talk about democracy as part of its foreign policy agenda, it has demonstrated financial commitment to several specific democracy aid programs. For instance, funding for democracy promotion programs in the foreign affairs budget increased by $234 million (9 percent) in fiscal year (FY) 2010.[11] To the surprise of many observers, President Obama continued to support the Bush-initiated MEPI and even requested increasing its budget by around 30 percent in both FY 2010 and FY 2011.[12] Obama also increased funding for the Millennium Challenge Corporation, another Bush Administration initiative, from $874 million to $1.28 billion in FY 2011. While the Administration has paid particular attention to funding Internet freedom programs, only a small portion has been disbursed to people actively working to reach dissidents.

Stephen McInerney, Director of Advocacy for the Project on Middle East Democracy, noted that, although overall funding for supporting democracy and human rights in the Middle East increased in the FY 2010 budget, a large portion was shifted from programs supporting civil society to rule-of-law programs.[13] In his report on the FY 2011 budget request,

8. Hillary Rodham Clinton, "A Conversation with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton," remarks at the Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, D.C., September 8, 2010, at *http://www.cfr.org/diplomacy/conversation-us-secretary-state-hillary-rodham-clinton/p22896* (February 7, 2011).

9. Robert Kagan, "America: Once Engaged, Now Ready to Lead," *The Washington Post*, October 1, 2010, at *http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/30/AR2010093005528.html* (February 7, 2011).

10. Lorne W. Craner, testimony before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, June 10, 2010, at *http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/111/cra061010.pdf* (January 31, 2011), and Lorne W. Craner, remarks at "U.S. Democracy Policy Under Obama" event.

11. Freedom House, "Making Its Mark: An Analysis of the Obama Administration FY2010 Budget Request for Democracy and Human Rights," *Special Report*, July 1, 2009, p. 1, at *http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/FY2010BudgetAnalysis.pdf* (January 31, 2011).

12. Stephen McInerney, "The Federal Budget and Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2011," Project on Middle East Democracy, April 2010, at *http://pomed.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/fy11-budget-analysis-final.pdf* (January 31, 2011).

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Funding for U.S. Democracy-Related Foreign Aid Has Remained Stable

Figures are in Millions of Dollars

	FY 2009 (Actual)	FY 2010 (Estimated)	FY 2011 (Requested)
USAID Office of DCHA, Governing Justly and Democratically Account	$68.5	$82.4	$59.8
State Department Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor	$18.8	$21.8	$23.7
State Department Middle East Partnership Initiative	$50.0	$65.0	$86.0
State Department Near East Regional Democracy Program	$25.0	$40.0	$40.0
National Endowment for Democracy	$115.0	$118.0	$105.0
U.N. Democracy Fund	$3.0	$4.5	$5.0
Millennium Challenge Corporation*	$850.0	$1,105.0	$1,279.7

Note: Figures are derived from selected democracy-related accounts and do not necessarily represent an exhaustive list of U.S. democracy funding. Figures do not include bilateral aid programs related to democracy promotion.

* Not all MCC budgets go to democracy promotion.

Sources: Funding data from U.S. Agency for International Development, Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance; U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor; National Endowment for Democracy; U.N. Democracy Fund, and Millennium Challenge Corporation.

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McInerney again praised the Administration's commitment to democracy programming but noted that it "is focusing too much on improving the ability of current regimes to govern while overlooking the need for pluralism and political competition."[14]

Supporting Liberty to Counter Terrorism

The fight against extremism is largely an ideological battle, and the principles of democratic governance and rule by the people are a powerful antidote to Islamist extremists' message of intolerance, hatred, and repression. Daniel Benjamin, current Coordinator for Counterterrorism at the State Department, noted in a 2008 academic paper that "[t]he U.S. needs a long-term strategy that makes Muslim societies less incubators for radicalism and more satisfiers of fundamental human needs."[15] In a joint report prepared for the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, the presidents of the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute emphasized the importance of democratizing societies as a way to reduce extremism by allowing avenues of dissent, alternation of power, and protections for minorities.[16]

Former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith, in an academic paper in 2010, also points to the need to promote ideas favorable to individual rights in Muslim societies. Rather than focus solely on messaging Muslim communities, Feith argues that U.S. policy must also develop effective ways to stimulate debate among Muslims themselves on the extremist ideologies promoted by al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations.[17] More specifically, the "[k]ey objective is not to induce Muslims to like the U.S. but to encourage them to reject understandings of Islam that condone and even encourage violence and subversion against the U.S. and the West."[18]

13. Stephen McInerney, "The Federal Budget and Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2010," Project on Middle East Democracy, July 2009, at *http://pomed.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/fy10-budget-analysis-paper-final.pdf* (January 31, 2011).

14. McInerney, "The Federal Budget and Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2011," p. 2.

15. Daniel Benjamin, "Strategic Counterterrorism," Brookings Institution *Policy Paper* No. 7, October 2008, p. 3, at *http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/Files/rc/papers/2008/10_terrorism_benjamin/10_terrorism_benjamin.pdf* (January 31, 2011).

16. Lorne W. Craner and Kenneth Wollack, "New Directions for Democracy Promotion," 2008, at *http://www.ndi.org/files/2344_newdirections_engpdf_07242008.pdf* (January 31, 2011).

The U.S. needs to implement strategies to counter Islamists who may not publicly condone terrorism but still seek to subvert democratic systems.[19] To do so successfully, the U.S. will need to engage with Muslim groups and leaders, but it must navigate this terrain carefully. The American model of religious liberty includes a favorable view of religious practice, both private and public, and assumes that religious leaders will take an active role in society.[20] While they may participate in the political process, Islamists' ideology often leads to discrimination against religious minorities and other anti-democratic measures and fuels support for terrorism. After all, Islamist ideology helped to form the basis for the development of al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations.

Some Muslim academics note that the American effort to confront Communism included working not only with conservative parties, but also with labor unions, social democrats, and youth movements. Thus, they argue that the U.S. should not focus solely on working with secular parties to confront Islamist extremism, but should also recognize that religious groups and parties can play a role in encouraging support for democratic principles.[21] U.S. officials should focus their engagement on those religious groups and parties that reject violence and unequivocally support democratic principles.

The U.S. has little to gain from engaging Islamists, who likely would use meetings with U.S. officials to bolster their local political standing and power, which they in turn would use to push an anti-democratic agenda. During a recent congressional hear-

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ing, Hudson Institute Senior Research Fellow Zeyno Baran testified that Islamism is a threat to democracy because the Islamist project is a long-term social transformation project designed to make Muslim communities fearful and thus easier to control. Baran argues that, to counter extremism, the U.S. must adopt a commitment to promoting liberal democracy and the empowerment of women.[22]

The authors of *Building Moderate Muslim Networks* note that a religious party's willingness to participate in elections should not be the sole criterion on which to judge whether it merits U.S. engagement and support. U.S. officials should also examine such issues as the party's support for internationally recognized human rights, the individual right to change religions, protection for equal treatment of religious minorities, and legal systems based on nonsectarian legal principles. The study further notes the importance of examining whether the party or group is aligned with radical groups or receives funding from radical foundations.[23]

However, well-known democracy scholar Tom Carothers cautions against boiling down extremism or radicalism to a lack of democracy. He notes that extremism can result from modernization, conflict between religious traditions, or opposition to U.S.

17. Douglas J. Feith and Abram N. Shulsky, "Organizing the U.S. Government to Counter Hostile Ideologies," Hudson Institute, March 2010, pp. 3–5, at *http://www.hudson.org/files/publications/Organizing_the_USG_to_Counter_Hostile_Ideologies.pdf* (January 31, 2011).

18. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

19. For the purposes of this paper, Islamists are defined as those who seek to establish an Islamic state in which Shari'a law is the sole basis for criminal and civil law.

20. Jennifer A. Marshall, "Religious Liberty in America: An Idea Worth Sharing Through Public Diplomacy," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2230, January 15, 2009, at *http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2009/01/Religious-Liberty-in-America-An-Idea-Worth-Sharing-Through-Public-Diplomacy*.

21. Amitai Etzioni, "Religion and Social Order," *Policy Review*, No. 148, March 28, 2008, at *http://www.hoover.org/publications/policy-review/article/5807* (January 31, 2011).

22. Zeyno Baran, "Engaging with Muslim Communities Around the World," testimony before the Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, February 26, 2009, at *http://foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/BaranTestimony090226p24.pdf* (January 31, 2011).

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policies in the region. Yet he acknowledges that "absence of democracy is allowing violent extremist movements to fester." Carothers further argues that democracy can either weaken radicals over time or open the door to greater radicalization when there is pent-up pressure for social change, as in Algeria in early 1990s and in the 2006 Palestinian elections, which brought Hamas to power. The issue is not cut and dried. Thus, policies to promote democracy need to be tailored to the unique circumstances of individual countries.[24] The U.S. should do nothing to condone, encourage, or accommodate Islamist forces, but their activities become a matter of direct U.S. concern only when they threaten fundamental human rights and freedoms. In such cases, it is incumbent on the U.S. to speak up for the principles of democracy and religious freedom.

Traditional Muslims vs. Islamist Extremists

The rise of Islamism over the past 40 years has been facilitated by several major geopolitical events, including the Iranian revolution in 1979, the mujahideen war against the Soviets in Afghanistan during the 1980s, rising oil prices, and the 9/11 attacks on the United States and their aftermath.[25] In Pakistan, the war in Afghanistan and the Islamization policies of President General Zia ul-Haq during the 1980s strengthened Islamist forces and puritanical Sunni Islamic sects, such as the Deobandis. The Deobandis are closely linked with a religiously intolerant interpretation of Islam and have established several hundred Islamic seminaries in Pakistan, many of which abet militancy. The Deobandis receive large amounts of funding from private financiers in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, who seek to promote versions of Islam that are more puritanical.

Muhammed Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's founding father, supported the idea of Islam serving as a unifying force in the newly established Pakistani state but envisioned the country functioning as a multi-religious and multiethnic democratic state. The reaction in Pakistan to the recent assassination of Punjab Governor Salman Taseer reveals that Pakistan is rapidly moving away from Jinnah's vision and that support for extremist ideologies within Pakistani society is much deeper and broader than previously understood. Taseer's murderer said that he killed Taseer because of his support for reform of anti-blasphemy laws, which are often misused against religious minorities. The day after Taseer's assassination, several hundred Pakistani clerics signed a statement condoning the murder and warning other Pakistanis against grieving for the governor.

U.S. officials should consider engaging with traditional religious leaders in Pakistan as a way to counter Islamist extremists pushing a more radical agenda.[26] Although some of these traditional Muslim leaders may be socially conservative, they are more likely to reject the violent methods of the Pakistani Taliban and the Islamist agenda of religious political parties, such as the Jamaat-i-Islami and the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam.[27]

The Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC), an umbrella group representing 60 Barelvi organizations that was formed in May 2009, has held conferences to forge unity among the various schools of Islamic thought against the Taliban and has issued religious

23. Angel Rabasa, Cheryl Bernard, Lowell H. Schwartz, and Peter Sickle, *Building Moderate Muslim Networks* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2007), p. 69, at *http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2007/RAND_MG574.pdf* (February 3, 2011).

24. Thomas Carothers, "U.S. Democracy Promotion During and After Bush," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007, at *http://carnegieendowment.org/files/democracy_promotion_after_bush_final.pdf* (January 31, 2011).

25. Sumit Ganguly and Manjeet S. Pardesi, "Politico-Economic and Radical Islamic Challenges to Democracy in Asia," in Ashley J. Tellis, Andrew Marble, and Travis Tanner, eds., *Strategic Asia Series 2010–11: Asia's Rising Power and America's Continued Purpose* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2010), p. 297.

26. Heidieh Mirahmadi, Mehreen Farooq, and Waleed Ziad, "Traditional Muslim Networks: Pakistan's Untapped Resource in the Fight Against Terrorism," World Organization for Resource Development and Education, May 2010, p. 2, at *http://www.worde.org/files/WhitePapers/WORDE%20White%20Paper%20-%20Traditional%20Muslim%20Networks.pdf* (January 31, 2011).

27. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

rulings against extremism. For example, after a series of militant attacks on Sufi shrines in Pakistan, the SIC pushed for a nationwide ban on extremist Deobandi literature, a crackdown on extremist groups, and stronger police and judicial action against suspected terrorists.

However, much to the surprise of Western observers, the SIC has adopted a hard-line position in favor of the country's controversial blasphemy laws. SIC leaders led demonstrations supporting the assassination of Salman Taseer, which has led outside observers to question their commitment to countering extremism and to wonder whether they are just another group seeking to exploit religious fervor among the masses for political gain.

The Need for Smart Democracy Promotion

As the U.S. promotes democratic principles and institutions abroad, it also needs to be aware of efforts by autocratic forces to counter democratic progress. Leaders of autocratic regimes, especially those who rely on economic windfalls from extractive industries or are part of an oligarchy whose interests are served by the state's wealth, seek to undercut support for indigenous democratic movements and have become increasingly adept at doing so. Authoritarian regimes often invest significant resources into managing and manipulating the media to promote anti-democratic values. Autocrats are also becoming skilled in establishing "pseudo-democracies" and using the word "democracy" to argue for anti-democratic standards.[28] The U.S. needs to better understand these anti-democratic forces in individual countries and actively counter their strategies.

United States Institute of Peace Vice President Steven Heydemann has recently written about a phenomenon he calls "authoritarian learning." Heydemann asserts that authoritarian states are beginning to organize themselves into a group that is systematically seeking to counterbalance Western, liberal democratic order. He argues that Iran, Russia, Venezuela, China, and other authoritarian states coordinate their policies and share success stories of deflecting pressure to democratize. They share this "authoritarian learning" with Arab regimes to help them resist Western pressure for political reform.[29] China's rapid economic growth under an autocratic regime has made the authoritarian model of governance more appealing and thus poses a serious challenge to democratic reform.[30]

Autocrats are also becoming skilled in establishing "pseudo-democracies" and using the word "democracy" to argue for anti-democratic standards.

A recent Freedom House survey confirms a global decline in political rights and civil liberties as the number of countries practicing democracy fell for the fourth consecutive year. The decline is attributed to restrictions on the free flow of information in China, brutal crackdowns on protesters in Iran and Egypt, and murder of human rights activists in Russia.[31] Freedom House also emphasizes that instituting democracy involves far more than hold-

28. Freedom House, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and Radio Free Asia, "Undermining Democracy: 21st Century Authoritarians," Freedom House, June 2009, pp. 3 and 5, at *http://www.underminingdemocracy.org/files/ UnderminingDemocracy_Full.pdf* (January 31, 2011).

29. Steven Heydemann, "Authoritarian Learning and Current Trends in Arab Governance," in "Oil, Globalization, and Political Reform," Brookings Institute *Doha Discussion Paper*, 2009, at *http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/Files/rc/papers/ 2009/02_oil_telhami/02_oil_telhami.pdf* (January 31, 2011).

30. Ganguly and Pardesi, "Politico-Economic and Radical Islamic Challenges to Democracy in Asia," pp. 295–297.

31. Arch Puddington, "Freedom in the World 2010: Erosion of Freedom Intensifies," in Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2010: Erosion of Freedom Intensifies*, November 2010, at *http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=351&ana_page= 362&year=2010* (January 31, 2011). See also Jennifer L. Windsor, prepared statement in hearing, *Human Rights and Democracy Assistance: Increasing the Effectiveness of U.S. Foreign Aid*, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, 111th Cong., 2nd Sess., June 10, 2010, p. 36, at *http://www.internationalrelations.house.gov/111/56888.pdf* (January 31, 2011).

ing elections.[32] It means developing a vibrant and free civil society, functioning and credible political parties, and active and free media.

There is the added complication of politicization of institutions that are supposed to monitor and oversee democratic processes. A recent example is the widespread perception of political interference by Afghan President Hamid Karzai in the country's Electoral Complaints Commission, which has tainted Afghanistan's 2010 parliamentary elections. In February 2010, Karzai used an emergency decree to give himself authority to appoint all provincial complaints commissioners.[33]

The U.S. does not have the luxury of ignoring autocratic regimes and often must engage with them to achieve specific U.S. foreign policy objectives. At the same time, the U.S. should not shy away from supporting civil society leaders and defenders of human rights in these countries. In some cases, U.S. diplomatic leverage has played a significant role in nudging an autocratic regime in a more democratic direction.[34] For example, in the 1980s, American diplomats pursued two-track policies of maintaining state-to-state relations with autocratic regimes in Latin America while pushing for democratic change when opportunities arose.[35]

In pursuing this two-track approach, U.S. public statements take on more weight. U.S. presidential statements in support of democracy promotion empower civil society leaders seeking democratic change and undermine their opponents.[36]

Promoting Democracy in Pivotal Muslim-Majority States

Freedom House has determined that only eight of the world's 47 Muslim-majority states qualify as "electoral democracies."[37] In some Muslim-majority states, democracy is kept in check by the fear that radical political Islam might fill the void if the authoritarian regime is displaced.[38] Yet well-known Middle East scholar Fawaz Gerges argues that the most effective means to deal with Islamism is not less democracy but more liberalization. Gerges asserts that nourishing and institutionalizing a vibrant civil society levels the playing field and provides the best counterweight to Islamists.[39]

In many of the Arab Muslim-majority states, oil wealth has contributed to the lack of democratic development by distorting the economy and generating windfall profits that accrue to the state and thus encourage the centralization of political power. In countries that receive large amounts of U.S. foreign aid, such as Egypt and Pakistan, the assistance, if not carefully monitored, can help to stifle democratic development by serving as a wealth base that allows the regime to sustain itself. However, most Muslim autocracies do not rely solely on coercion and fear to sustain their power. They often consult and co-opt opponents and hold controlled elections.

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32. Gabe Joselow, "Authoritarian Regimes Continue to Suppress World Freedom," VOANews.com, January 13, 2011, at *http://www.voanews.com/english/news/Report-Authoritarian-Regimes-Continue-to-Suppress-World-Freedom-113519114.html* (February 7, 2011).

33. Scott Worden, "The Messy End-Game of Afghanistan's Elections," *Foreign Policy*, November 16, 2010, at *http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/11/16/the_messy_end_game_of_afghanistans_elections* (January 31, 2011).

34. David Adesnik and Michael McFaul, "Engaging Autocratic Allies to Promote Democracy," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Spring 2006), p. 8, at *http://www.twq.com/06spring/docs/06spring_adesnik.pdf* (January 31, 2011).

35. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

37. These states include Albania, Bangladesh, Comoros, Indonesia, Maldives, Mali, Senegal, and Turkey, according to Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2010*. Freedom House uses a number of criteria to determine whether a country has met certain minimum standards and qualifies as an "electoral democracy."

38. Larry Diamond, "The Arab Democracy Deficit," *Hoover Digest*, No. 4 (Fall 2010), p. 93, at *http://www.hoover.org/publications/hoover-digest/article/49731* (January 31, 2011).

39. Fawaz Gerges, "Democracy in the Middle East: Disentangling Myth from Reality," Institute for Social Policy and Understanding *Policy Brief* No. 10, March 1, 2005, at *http://www.ispu.org/files/PDFs/344_PB_democracy%20muslim%20policy%20brief%20-%20gerges.pdf* (January 31, 2011).

The U.S. needs to avoid adopting a one-size-fits-all strategy for implementing democracy programs and encouraging political reform. Instead, it should tailor its approaches to the specific circumstances of each country. The Muslim-majority countries discussed below pose special challenges for U.S. democracy promotion efforts.

Turkey, Indonesia, and Bangladesh—three of the largest Muslim-majority countries that Freedom House labeled "electoral democracies"—deserve close U.S. attention because their examples in navigating democratic paths will help to shape broader trends of democratic development in Asia and Muslim-majority polities around the world.

Turkey. Turkey occupies a critical geostrategic position as the bridge between West and East, and recent moves have raised serious questions about the current ruling party's commitment to democracy and secularism.[40] The U.S. needs to pay special attention to political developments inside Turkey and should be willing to criticize government actions that threaten to reverse democratic trends in Turkey.

In a mid-September nationwide referendum, Turkey passed 26 constitutional amendments supported by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). The amendments increased the AKP's control of the judiciary and weakened checks and balances within government. Critics of the referendum argue that the government will now seek to name religious conservatives to key judicial posts. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan used a $2.5 billion tax assessment to silence media critics, especially the Dogan Group, and used the Ergenikon conspiracy, mostly manufactured by pro-AKP police and prosecutors, to arrest and threaten senior military officers and intellectuals.

In 2008, the country's Constitutional Court came close to banning the AKP for anti-secularism. Indeed, Prime Minister Erdogan has taken steps to limit secularism, such as attempting to criminalize adultery for women and facilitating extremist Salafi

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education, which had been banned. A recent report by the European Union enlargement commissioner criticized Turkey for shortcomings in free speech and freedom of religion and raised concerns about minority rights.[41]

Indonesia. Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim-majority nation. Presidents Obama and Bush have held up Indonesia as an example to the world, praising its "transformation" to democracy and its religious tolerance.

In the 2009 elections, in which President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was reelected, Indonesian Islamist parties received a minor setback, capturing about 16 percent of the vote, down from 20 percent in 2004 elections.[42] To expand its base, the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), the major Islamist party, sought to appeal to Indonesian nationalism and downplay its commitment to Islamism. However, the campaign failed.[43] The PKS has peaked as a formal political force but continues to serve in the president's governing coalition as a senior partner.

Indonesian governments since the reestablishment of democracy in 1998, including Yudhoyono's, and popular opinion have continued to

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40. Ariel Cohen, "Turkey's Referendum: A Looming Challenge to U.S. Interests?" Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 3016, September 17, 2010, at *http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/09/turkeys-referendum-a-looming-challenge-to-us-interests.*

41. "Turkey Stresses Accession Benefits for EU," *Irish Times*, November 18, 2010, at *http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/world/2010/1118/1224283626651.html* (January 31, 2011).

42. Walter Lohman, "U.S.–Indonesia Relations: Build for Endurance, Not Speed," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2381, March 4, 2010, at *http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/03/US-Indonesia-Relations-Build-for-Endurance-Not-Speed.*

43. Walter Lohman, "Indonesian President Yudhoyono's Big Decision," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2393, April 10, 2009, at *http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2009/04/indonesian-president-yudhoyonos-big-decision.*

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support the nonsectarian ideology of Pancasila, which is the heart of Indonesian constitutionalism. Pancasila encompasses principles of belief in God, just and civilized humanity, the unity of Indonesia, representative democracy, and social justice, providing a tolerant philosophical base for a vast multiethnic, multireligious country.[44]

Still, Islamists are continuing to press their agenda at the grassroots level. They continue to spearhead campaigns that discriminate against religious minorities, and they exert pressure on society and the political system in a way that indirectly furthers their aims. Violence against religious minorities, while not widespread, is rising in Indonesia.

Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, democracy was restored in December 2008 after 18 months of rule by a military-backed interim government. The 2008 election, which brought to power the Awami League Party's Sheikh Hasina, has helped to counter the immediate threat from Islamist extremists, who had sought to make inroads in Bangladesh over the past five years. Sheikh Hasina's government has taken proactive steps to crack down on radical Islamists and to emphasize the democratic principles of the country's founding.

However, like many other Muslim-majority nations, Bangladesh continues to struggle to define the role of Islam in society and governance. Its robust civil society, a vibrant community of nongovernmental organizations, an independent judiciary, and the active participation of women in the social and economic spheres have thus far contributed to denying extremists a foothold. Still, Washington needs to continue to engage closely with Dhaka to encourage democratic trends, steady development of the country's economy, and steps to rein in pervasive corruption, which threatens to corrode democratic institutions.

Egypt. The mounting protests convulsing Egypt present a tough challenge to U.S. policymakers, who must balance the need to support liberal democratic freedoms with avoiding an abrupt political change that will be exploited by Islamists, who would ultimately push a decidedly nondemocratic ideology. The Egyptian government is characterized as "semi-authoritarian" because it stifles genuine political competition but leaves some space for the expression of political opposition.[45]

Many believe that the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, if elected to power, would roll back what freedoms do exist in areas such as religious freedom and minority rights. The Muslim Brotherhood has proven that it has a support base at the ballot box, perhaps largely because it represents a very vocal opposition to President Hosni Mubarak.

Since the 1950s, power has been highly concentrated in the presidency. Beginning in the late 1970s, an opposition press was formed, some state institutions gained a degree of autonomy from the presidency, and the Muslim Brotherhood was allowed to operate openly, although without legal status as a political party. The Muslim Brotherhood has been able to elect its supporters to parliament by running candidates under other party affiliations or as independents. Its success in the 2005 elections led President Mubarak to intensify a crackdown on the organization.

Egypt's November 2010 parliamentary elections, orchestrated by the government under more restrictive conditions than in 2005, produced a landslide victory for the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). The NDP won more than 90 percent of the seats in the People's Assembly, with the opposition's and independents' share declining from 24 percent to less than 10 percent. The Muslim Brotherhood, which had occupied about 20 percent of the seats, boycotted the runoff elections and was shut out of parliament. President Mubarak may have calculated that engineering the results of the 2010 election would make it easier for him to win the September 2011 presidential elections, but blatant manipulation of the electoral process seems to have undermined his government's legitimacy and to have

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44. Lohman, "U.S.–Indonesia Relations: Build for Endurance, Not Speed."

45. Amr Hamzawy and Nathan J. Brown, "The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood: Islamist Participation in a Closing Political Environment," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace *Paper* No. 19, March 2010, at *http://carnegieendowment.org/files/muslim_bros_participation.pdf* (February 4, 2011).

contributed to the current widespread protests demanding his ouster.

The Obama Administration appears to have de-emphasized support for democracy in its aid programs with respect to Egypt over the past two years. Democracy experts have raised concerns about the changing patterns of U.S. aid to Egypt under the Obama Administration, which is directing funds away from "non-registered" NGOs toward govern-

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ment-organized NGOs established to reinforce the political status quo. Furthermore, they worry about the Obama Administration's tentative plan to use a government-run "endowment" to distribute hundreds of millions of dollars in U.S. aid, thereby escaping congressional oversight and draining aid away from civil society groups.[46]

However, the recent protests in Egypt are prompting the Administration to toughen its policy toward the Mubarak regime and to call more emphatically for democratic reform. It is yet to be seen whether the evolving situation will cause the Administration to change its policies and programs with regard to democracy-related aid to the country.

Pakistan. Pakistan is in a state of transition in which democratic parties and institutions function but are not yet rooted deeply enough in society to prevent a return to military rule. The Bush Administration successfully leveraged its relationship with military ruler President Pervez Musharraf to induce him to work with the political parties to restore civilian-led rule through credible elections in February 2008. These elections brought to power the Pakistan People's Party led by Asif Ali Zardari, the widower of two-time Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, who was assassinated in December 2007 by Pakistani militants.

The military continues to wield tremendous influence in the country, particularly in security matters, and many observers believe that it has backed away from politics only temporarily. The military has ruled Pakistan for more than half of the country's existence. Moreover, the civilian government has recently lost popular support because of perceived corruption and incompetence, especially its feeble response in 2010 to the worst flooding in Pakistan's history.

Islamist political parties performed poorly in the 2008 elections, garnering only 2 percent of the national vote, but they continue to influence the legal framework and political discourse in ways that restrict personal freedoms and subordinate women and minorities. A wave of terrorist attacks throughout Pakistan that has killed thousands of civilians and security personnel is contributing to a sense of instability and uncertainty about the country's future.

The Obama Administration has prioritized supporting Pakistan's transition to democracy as demonstrated by its fivefold increase in U.S. funding for democracy and governance programs from FY 2008 to FY 2010 and a significant increase in overall economic funding through the Kerry–Lugar legislation enacted in October 2009.

Iran. Iran poses a special challenge because Washington does not have diplomatic relations with Tehran but still seeks to encourage democratic trends in the country. For the first time since 2005, the U.S. has cut funding for Iranian civil society groups pushing for democratic reform. Instead, the Obama Administration in March 2009 introduced the Near East Regional Democracy program to support media, technology, and Internet freedom in Iran.

The Obama Administration appears to want to distance itself from the Bush Administration policy of supporting democratic reformers in Iran and to focus instead on less controversial media programs and educational and cultural exchanges. The Obama Administration is clearly downplaying commitment to Iranian civil society, which President Bush strongly supported.

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46. McInerney, "The Federal Budget and Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2011," pp. 25–27.

What the U.S. Should Do

U.S. policymakers have several tools with which to promote concepts of individual liberty, religious freedom, and pluralism in Muslim-majority societies, even those ruled by autocrats or semi-autocrats. The U.S. should continue to program and fund targeted and effective democracy promotion efforts that encourage the development of a vibrant civil society, free media, representative political parties, a strong and independent judiciary, a parliamentary process that provides a necessary check on the executive, and principles of religious freedom and tolerance in the education system and other institutions.

Yet democracy funding and programming alone will not usher in democracy in the many countries where authoritarianism and extremism are deeply entrenched. In these contexts, it is particularly important that U.S. officials speak with consistency—both privately and publicly—on the importance of democratic principles when dealing with friendly regimes. They should exert constant pressure on them to respect the human rights of their citizens, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, or religion.

The Obama Administration has rightly adopted a cautious approach toward recent developments in Egypt. At the time of writing, street protests against Mubarak's rule have rocked the country for more than a week. Egypt is one of America's closest allies in the Middle East and has adhered to a critical peace treaty with Israel for more than three decades. As one of the largest U.S. economic and military aid recipients, Egypt enjoys close military ties with the United States. However, unyielding support for Mubarak's authoritarian rule against the wishes of the vast majority of Egyptians would risk unleashing fresh waves of public anger against the U.S., which could easily be exploited by al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups.

Secretary Clinton has rightly called for an "orderly transition" to bring about a "democratic, participatory government" without directly calling for Mubarak's ouster. Yet as Heritage Foundation analyst James Phillips recently noted, "the Obama Administration should be careful not to empower anti-democratic forces such as the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood."[47] By prodding the regime to hold genuinely free and fair elections and by linking U.S. aid to this process, the U.S. can help to usher in a more democratic government in Egypt.

U.S. officials should also work closely with the private sector wherever possible to foster support for principles of liberty. The Administration's Summit on Entrepreneurship, held in April 2010 to deepen ties among business leaders, foundations, and entrepreneurs in the United States and Muslim communities around the world, provided an opportunity to build private–public partnerships that can reduce support for extremist ideologies and promote liberty.

In particular, the U.S. should:

- **Make the promotion of liberty and democratic freedoms in Muslim-majority countries a key part of U.S. efforts to fight extremism and terrorism.** While the most recent National Security Strategy highlighted U.S. support for the expansion of democracy and human rights in broad terms, the Obama Administration should be more pointed in its statements, policies, and aid programs about the importance of promoting individual freedom as a way to counter extremist movements and ideology.

More specifically, the Office of Democracy and Governance in the U.S. Agency for International Development should develop and implement assistance programs that foster civil society dialogue among local religious, civic, and political leaders on the compatibility of local customs and religious practices with concepts of democracy and religious freedom. Engaging with civil society and local religious leaders on such issues as human rights, political and economic reform, and the role of religion in society will help to raise awareness about the benefits that democratic systems and practices can provide to all societies.

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47. James Phillips, "Egyptian Army Faces Difficult Choice as Situation Deteriorates," The Foundry, January 30, 2011, at *http://blog.heritage.org/?p=51230* (February 7, 2011).

- **Follow through with recommendations for countering extremist ideologies in the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR).** The State Department released the long-anticipated QDDR on December 15, 2010. With regard to promoting democracy and countering extremism, the QDDR proposed establishing an Undersecretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights and "work[ing] with Congress to establish a Bureau for Counterterrorism which will enhance our ability to counter violent extremism, build partner capacity, and engage in counterterrorism diplomacy."[48]

  The effort to elevate the issues of democracy and human rights within the State Department bureaucracy, and specifically to identify countering violent extremism as a functional effort of diplomacy, is laudable. However, the State Department needs to focus on reorganizing the resources and staff already at its disposal rather than on hiring new staff to meet the new priorities. As part of this new focus, diplomats should receive training and education in America's founding principles and in extremist ideologies to enhance their ability to engage on these issues.

- **Prioritize supporting governments and private groups with track records of countering extremism.** The MEPI represents an innovative program to encourage the development of a vibrant civil society in Middle East countries, and the Obama Administration deserves credit for sustaining and building on this unique model of providing U.S. democracy assistance. However, the U.S. should not overlook countries in which substantial progress has already been made in fighting extremist ideologies, such as Indonesia and Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi example of fusing local culture with Islam in a way that upholds democratic values, supports religious tolerance and pluralism, and serves as a bulwark against extremist groups can serve as a model for other countries.

- **Use leverage with the governments of Muslim countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states, to press for improved rights and economic opportunities for women.** According to recent studies, there has been progress in female education, declines in fertility rates, and improvements in life expectancy in the Middle East, but indicators such as women's economic participation and political empowerment continue to lag. The entry of women into the labor force is a key step in economic and social development, as seen in the case of Bangladesh. Women's rights movements in Morocco and Tunisia also have been credited to the high rates of female labor participation in these countries.

- **Work with global organizations that seek to discredit the extremist ideology that fuels terrorism.** Several nongovernmental organizations—such as the U.S.-based World Organization for Resource Development and Education, the United Kingdom-based Quilliam Foundation, and the Indonesia-based LibforAll Foundation—seek to work with traditional Muslim communities to counter Islamic radicalism. The U.S. should use them as valuable sources of insight into what traditional Muslim communities can do and are already doing to counter the extremist narrative. The U.S. should also facilitate networking among these organizations to empower an international counterradicalization network. Where welcomed by the recipient, the U.S. should be prepared to support such groups financially and, as needed, organizationally.

- **Prioritize engagement with leaders of Muslim-majority countries on education curricula and how they treat concepts of religious freedom and tolerance.** The U.S. should use its leverage to facilitate changes in these curricula to foster ideals of religious freedom. U.S. officials should recognize the important work of nongovernmental institutions that are seeking to expand the curricula of madrassahs. For example, the U.S.-based International Center for Religion and

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48. U.S. State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development, *Leading Through Civilian Power: The First Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review*, 2010, pp. 42–45, at *http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/153108.pdf* (February 7, 2011).

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Diplomacy has been conducting a successful Madrassah Enhancement Program in Pakistan that encourages educational institutions to expand their curriculum to include the social and scientific disciplines, with an emphasis on religious tolerance and human rights.

- **Develop policies that actively counter "authoritarian globalization."** U.S. policymakers should take advantage of opportunities to work closely with democratic states to strengthen the legitimacy and power of democratic concepts in various regions. For example, President Obama's recent four-nation tour of Asian democracies (India, Indonesia, South Korea, and Japan) sent a strong message about the binding power of shared democratic values between the U.S. and Asia's democratic powers.

- **Not expect immediate results from efforts to promote grassroots democracy or assume that elections alone ensure that a country is on the path to democracy.** In several cases, elections have been manipulated to sustain autocracies or semi-autocracies. When evaluating a country's level of democratization, the U.S. needs to monitor institutions that are responsible for overseeing the electoral process, the structure of the political parties themselves, the level of media freedom, the independence of the judiciary, and checks on executive power. U.S. officials also need to consider the possibility that Islamist parties could use elections to gain power and then roll back democratic systems and practices once they are in control. U.S. officials need to be careful about with whom they are dealing and judge actions, not words. Autocrats have become adept at using democratic language to conceal their true intentions.

- **Guard against promoting democracy as an industry.** The U.S. must rely on field workers and experts in governance and democracy programming when deciding where to commit U.S. funding. The quality, not the quantity, of democracy programming in any given country will make the difference in influencing whether effective grassroots programs blossom or U.S. money contributes to corruption and lackluster efforts to expand political participation and competition.

Conclusion

The Obama Administration needs to prioritize the promotion of democracy and individual freedom as part of its foreign policy agenda. This is particularly important in Muslim countries where repression and intolerance can foster development of extremist movements that feed global terrorism.

Recent statements from President Obama and other senior Administration officials signaling strong support for democratic development in other countries are encouraging. The Administration should continue to demonstrate its commitment to nurturing democratic development both through public statements and through aid programs that account for the particular circumstances of individual countries. In doing so, the U.S. would not only adhere to its founding principles and help to secure freedom for others, but also protect its national security by uprooting support for extremist ideologies that lead to global terrorism.