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The Role of Foreign Actors in the Development of Democracy in the Middle East-North Africa

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What role is played by foreign actors in the development of democracy in the MENA region? Is this role constructive?

Foreign actors have been heavily involved in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region throughout its history. As such, they have left a lasting and significant impact on its landscape, from its architectural design to its cultural identity. Yet in 2010, fourteen of its eighteen states were classified 'not free' by the Freedom House organisation (Freedom House: 2010). Regarding the role that foreign actors have played in promoting democracy in the region, academics have tended to overlook them in favour of internal dynamics (Cavatorta: 2009: 325). Yet the historical and strategic importance of the MENA region within the international system demands their detailed consideration. It soon becomes obvious that foreign actors have in fact played a significant role in the development of democracy throughout the Middle East. Admittedly, however, it has not always been constructive. To understand why, it is important to appreciate the role they have played in the past. This essay will therefore consider a chronological approach to the involvement of foreign actors in the region. However, rather than focus on the specific actors themselves, the emphasis will be on their impact on the development of democracy. It will therefore consider first the role of the European imperial system, before looking more closely at the obstacles to democracy in the postcolonial period. It will then be important to look at the democracy promotion schemes spearheaded by the US and EU. Finally, the differences in approach after 9/11 must also be discussed, as should the emergence of new and increasingly diverse actors within the region today.

Defining concepts

Before assessing the impact of foreign actors in the region, it is first important to acknowledge and define the concepts that should be addressed. Given that the specific focus will be the extent of their influence on the establishment of democratic regimes, there is an obvious need to establish a working definition of democracy itself. As a concept within International Relations theory, this has been particularly difficult to define. According to its Greek origins, democratic governance simply means the rule of the people (Held: 2006: 1). A collective governing body and the absence of a singular authoritative figure should therefore be considered its most fundamental requirement. Yet the subsequent ambiguity of the concept itself has prompted contestation among academics, many of which have used its classical definition as the basis of their own. As an example, David Held proceeds to highlight the need for political equality among the peoples of an established political community (Held: 2006: 1). Similarly, Robert Dahl agrees that equality leads to inclusiveness, yet he also acknowledges the need for contestation and participation within the democratic system (Dahl: 1989: 233). This automatically implies that freedoms of expression and the ability to act on them are an important consideration. As such, free elections and an independent press should be considered hallmarks of a democratic regime. These must be maintained through the rule of law and the presence of a strong civil society.

It is equally important to identify the nature of the foreign actors that have played a role in the development of democracy in the Middle East. These are most likely to be associated with Europe, America or the West in general. Yet given the sheer geographical size of the MENA region, it is hardly surprising to find that actors have engaged in

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the affairs of others within the regional boundaries of the Middle East; for example, Israeli forces played an active role in the Lebanese Civil War after the invasion of South Lebanon in 1982 (Young and Kent: 2004: 538). Foreign actors must therefore be considered foreign to the state, rather than the entire region. To some extent, this shifts the focus of the discussion because it demands the consideration of perceived internal forces and actors. Most notably, it suggests that Islam should be considered a foreign actor to the majority of the region itself. This is because the Islamic Empire expanded rapidly under the leadership of the caliphs, extending across northern Africa and into southern Europe at its peak (Gad: 2009: 66). The nature of its religious foundation prompted the development of democratic institutions in the region long before the arrival of the Europeans. Specifically, this is because the Islamic faith highlights the importance of tolerance and democratic participation as part of its ideology.[1] It would therefore be wrong to assume that democracy is an alien concept to the region. In many ways, this owes itself to the historical role of Islam as a foreign actor.

European imperialism

European colonial powers were the first recognisably modern foreign actors to engage in the region. Their motivations and interests in the Middle East have been well documented: economic and strategic interests were particularly important (Milton Edwards: 2006: 17). Yet colonialism and democracy are largely incompatible. To understand why, Osabu-Kle has looked to colonial rule in sub-Saharan Africa. Specifically, he explains that the legitimisation of colonial power depended on the imposition of strict structures of control (Osabu-Kle: 2000: 19). Given that the intention was to exploit both human and material resources, there was little emphasis on the development of democratic institutions; indeed colonial powers held no accountability to the native populations. As such, they have justifiably been regarded a 'principally coercive and predatory dictatorship' (Osabu-Kle: 2000: 19). The structures they imposed were therefore based on hierarchical assumptions that closely resemble Orientalist notions of the other. Direct comparisons can therefore be made to the role of the Europeans in the MENA region. Orientalism should be considered a particularly important theoretical approach to the nature of colonial rule. Specifically, it suggests that Europe has defined itself through its opposition to the Islamic world and has therefore tended to consider itself civilised at the expense of those beyond its borders (Said: 2003). As such, it highlights the inequality and racial prejudice at the heart of the colonial project.

As a result, the colonial legacy is largely dismissed as an obstacle to the region's ongoing development. For example, postcolonial theory focuses almost exclusively on the structural limitations that it has imposed (Smith and Owens: 2008: 189). Yet it would be fundamentally wrong to assume that the European colonial project only hindered the development of democracy in the Middle East. For example, its economic foundations prompted the development of a new mercantile class to oversee the management of its interests. Cypher and Dietz call this the collaborative elite (Cypher and Dietz: 1997: 78). This can be compared the experiences of the MENA region. By implication, its own economic involvement with Europe led to the similar development of a new middle class. Modernisation theorists consider this an important force for the development of democracy because their values and beliefs are more likely to reject the imposition of authoritarian rule (Lipset: 1960: 51). Importantly, they also benefitted from access to the advanced European education system; many of the educated elite would later promote nationalism and the end of European influence (Henry and Springborg: 2001: 18). In this they were aided by the development of the press, itself a byproduct of colonial interest in the region. For example, the French had begun to publish gazettes in the Middle East as early 1795. The press would later expand rapidly in Egypt because the British occupation 'made conditions favourable' (Lewis: 1997). Admittedly, these were more an effort to protect pro-British papers than an attempt to promote freedom of the press (Kelidar: 1993: 8). Yet the effect was the same. The liberalisation of the Egyptian press became an important means of promoting the nationalist cause and thus the democratisation of the state itself.

However, such benefits are largely outweighed by the negative impact of European involvement in the region. Politically, it has led to division and conflict among its population. This can be traced back to the conclusion of the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration after the First World War. Together, they divided the former Ottoman Empire into areas of British and French influence based on their own strategic interests (Roberson: 1998: 5). New political entities such as Transjordan and Iraq were officially established, yet the artificial nature of their boundaries failed to consider local tradition, beliefs, culture or possible community of interests (Roberson: 1998: 9).

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Such blatant disregard for the native population has therefore hindered the prospects for democracy in the region because it has undermined the natural development of statehood. Specifically, it has changed the role that nationalism can play within the process. It had previously helped bring an end to colonial rule, yet it is largely incompatible with the political boundaries that were imposed on the region by foreign actors. As such, it is largely responsible for the persistence of conflict and violence within the region today (Brock: 2000: 157). Yet transition theory highlights the necessity of national unity as a means of identifying those that must be included within the democratic system (Potter: 2005: 14). Its absence should be considered a direct consequence of European rule.

Post-independence

Admittedly, instances of democratic governance emerged after the colonial period. For example, parliamentary institutions played an important role in Iraq, Syria Lebanon and Egypt after 1945 (Pool: 1994 cited in Bromley: 2005: 325). They were often established under the influence of European powers, yet were quickly overthrown and replaced with increasingly authoritarian regimes. Thus it is difficult to accredit them with the development of democracy in the region. On the contrary, the international community largely appeared to welcome the new regimes during the Cold War. This was because both superpowers recognised the strategic importance of the region and the need to appease its members. Despite the fact that atheistic communism appealed little to Islamic societies, the Soviet Union attempted to use anti-colonial rhetoric to their advantage, while the US supported autocratic regimes that resisted Soviet influence (Sorenson: 2008: 20). Scholars have therefore acknowledged the importance of the role that foreign actors played in the region during the Cold War. Specifically, Bromley emphasises the fact that US support for Israel and Soviet support for radical Arab groups led to high levels of military cooperation in the region (Bromley: 2005: 334). This was because they supplied arms and military assistance to their respective ally. Bromley notes that the power of the state in relation to other domestic forces rose dramatically, while the power of the military was increasingly asserted within the state itself. He accurately recognises that such an imbalance has damaged the pursuit of democratic governance because it has elevated the position of the state at the expense of other internal actors (Bromley: 2005: 334).

The US has continued to exert its influence in the region since the end of the Cold War. Specifically, it has sought to protect its strategic and geopolitical interests. Niall Ferguson highlights the increased American presence in the region after the first Gulf War; the number of US military personnel almost trebled during the 1990s from six thousand in 1993 to sixteen thousand in 2000 (Ferguson: 2004: 137). He focuses particularly on the growing dependence of the Saudi regime on US military supplies. This, he explains, has fuelled resentment by radical Islamist movements; Saudi clerics have dismissed US military presence as part of a larger design to dominate the Arab and Muslim world (Ferguson: 2004: 137). More recently, the US invasion of Iraq has appeared to clarify the extent that the US will go to support its own ambitions in the region; it is widely assumed that military action was an attempt to secure its access to oil reserves (Adams: 2007). Its presence in the region is therefore overwhelming. Ferguson calls it American imperialism. This may be an exaggeration, yet it is difficult to ignore the parallels that can be drawn between the American and European role in the region; economic interest, military presence and indirect rule are perhaps the most obvious. Yet Ferguson is too keen to emphasise the benefits of American imperialism. He believes it can learn from the mistakes of European empire and use its resources to both actively promote and ensure the safety of democratic rule (Ferguson: 2004: 300). In doing so, he fails to acknowledge that imperial rule can only undermine the development of democratic governance, regardless of its intentions.

Democracy promotion

This is not to say that the US has not attempted to promote the establishment of democracy in the region. Indeed, it has become an increasingly important aspect of its foreign policy, in which it shares mutual interests with the EU (Cavatorta and Durac: 2009). Together, these two actors are the most explicit causes for democracy in the region and they demand a closer consideration as a result. To some extent, their policies stem from traditional Kantian democratic peace theory. This simply implies that democratic states do not declare war upon each other (Dunne: 2008: 112). As such, schemes have tended to focus on the implementation of the core aspects of a democratic regime. Carothers looks to USAID as an example. This policy has specifically addressed three key elements of democratic rule; elections, governmental institutions and the establishment of civil society (Carothers: 1997).

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Admittedly, they are an important part of the democratisation process. Yet regimes cannot simply hold an election and declare themselves a democracy. It is therefore necessary to consider the emergence of façade democracies. As Milton Edwards has suggested, these are regimes that uphold elements of democracy in order to appease the international community. Yet in reality, they are manipulated by the regime in order to ensure its own survival (Milton Edwards: 1993). She looks specifically to Jordan as a regime that has held elections but is still autocratic. Schemes such as USAID must therefore be criticised for failing to address the causes of the democratic deficit itself.

Furthermore, there appears to have been a general lack of interest in democracy promotion before the events of 9/11. They certainly did not feature high on the priorities of foreign actors. Instead, their policies tended to focus on the need for stability in the region. This should be considered an attempt to maintain their strategic interests in the area. For example, the UK government worked closely with the Gadhafi regime in Libya so as to ensure its continued access to energy supplies (Hughes: 2011). Similarly, the wider policies of the EU have maintained a steady relationship with members of Gulf Cooperation Council despite their obvious lack of democratic governance; Saudi Arabia has a particularly poor record of human rights abuses. It is therefore obvious that democratic reform therefore suffers at the expense of strategic interest and the clauses of democracy promotion have never been physically enforced as a result. In some instances, the EU has even dropped them from its negotiations; for example, it has not attached conditions for democratic reform to negotiations on trade, aid and investment in Libya, Syria or Iran (Youngs: 2010: 65). For Youngs, this represents a retreat from liberal internationalism. This may be an overstatement, yet Durac agrees that political transformation is unlikely to occur so long as the strategic priorities of both the EU and the US take precedence over democratic objectives (Durac: 2009). As such, he justifiably concludes that foreign intervention is unlikely to result in the redistribution of power within autocratic regimes. In contrast, they appear to prolong their existence.

Changing approaches and new foreign actors

However, democracy promotion has once again attracted support in the aftermath of 9/11. Given the heightened sense of international security, foreign policy initiatives have specifically sought to address the causes of extremism and terrorist activity. As such, the democratic deficit in the MENA region is of particular concern to international powers including the US and the EU. Iraq has been the most extreme example of US-enforced regime change in the region. Although it has by no means led to the establishment of a successful democratic state, Iraq today is equally no longer an autocratic regime (Cavatorta: 2009: 322). Thus the renewed commitment to democracy promotion may be considered a constructive step within the democratisation process itself. Meanwhile, the Bush Doctrine publicly raised the profile of democracy promotion; the former President explicitly argued that it should now take precedence over stability (Powel: 2009: 70). Yet beyond this, there is little to suggest that foreign actors are any more engaged in the imposition of democratic regimes than before. As an example, Powel looks to the regional policies of the EU and the US in Tunisia. These have pushed less for political liberalisation at the expense of maintaining the status quo. Given the uncertainties and risks of opening the political system, Powel concludes that the latter is considered the safer option (Powel: 2009: 70).

Despite their ongoing presence within the region, it must be noted that US and the EU are far from the only two actors involved in the development of democracy. Indeed, the diversity of foreign actors has grown significantly within the modern period. As an example, Najem believes that the weakness of the Lebanese state has made it susceptible to foreign intervention. For this reason, he believes that the number of actors has been particularly high (Najem: 2005: 113). In recent years, these have ranged from Syrian penetration to Israeli occupation in the South. More recently, Iran has become increasingly involved in the development of democracy through its ties with Hezbollah, including the funding of reconstruction efforts after 2006 (BBC News: 2006). The role they were able to play as a result of Iranian support led to widespread criticism of the Lebanese government and thus affected its legitimacy to rule. Once again, this should be considered evidence of the role that actors within the region can play on the development of democracy on another. In this case, Iranian support for Hezbollah works to undermine the existing government. As such, it is threatening the fragile state of its attempts to rule through democratic means.

Conclusion

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It is perhaps an overall criticism of democratisation theory that it does not tend to consider the constructive role that foreign actors have played within the development of democracy in the MENA region. From the arrival of the Islamic Empire, notions of democratic governance have been gradually introduced within its borders. Almost unintentionally, the European colonial project stimulated the growth of a new wealthy and educated social class whose values and interests began to challenge and undermine the legitimacy of its rule. Many also became involved with the nationalist movements that ultimately led to their independence after the Second World War. They were able to do so largely because the Europeans brought with them the means of political expression through the introduction of a relatively free press. More recently, democracy promotion schemes by the US and the EU have prompted the introduction of elections and elements of political reform. Although they are not necessarily sufficient proof of a democratic regime, they should be considered a fundamental part of the process of democratisation itself. As such, it would perhaps be wrong to assume that foreign actors only hinder the development of democracy. Yet the overriding impression of their role suggests otherwise.

Looking again at the European role, its legacy is predominantly one of ethnic conflict and political divide. To some extent, the subsequent weakness of the state has made it susceptible to foreign interference from new actors within the region. Meanwhile, the Cold War led to the militarisation of local politics and the entrenchment of authoritarian regimes. These have largely undermined the ability of the region to pursue effective reform. Structures of power have been used to maintain strategic interests in the region. As such, democracy promotion schemes have largely been neglected at the expense of political stability. Foreign actors have therefore undermined the ability of the region to democratise. Yet given the ongoing political unrest in the region, there is an opportunity for them to play a far more constructive role in the development of democracy than they have in the past.

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[1] Milton Edwards (2006: 175) provides a particularly useful overview of the compatibilities of Islam and democracy.

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