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### **Executive Summary:**

# **In Pursuit of Democracy *and* Security in the Greater Middle East:**

## *A USIP Study Group Report*

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **PART I: GENERAL FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This report offers a set of general and country-specific findings and recommendations to assist the Obama administration in its efforts to tackle escalating security challenges while sustaining diplomatic, institutional and economic support for democracy and human rights in the Greater Middle East.

The working group recognizes that addressing threats from terrorist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda, as well as stemming conflicts arising from the persistence of regional conflicts in the Middle East and South Asia, must be a top priority. But, as the case studies of Yemen, Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon amply demonstrate, long-term political stability, economic development and security also requires a continued and even enhanced U.S. commitment, in both words and deeds, to fostering democratic transformation, human rights and effective governance. The architecture of security and peacemaking must be accompanied by a revived focus on democratic reforms.

Absent such an effort, this study group believes that the already wide political, social and ideological gap between states and societies will further expand, thus making regimes, and even entire states vulnerable to internal and external shocks. It is the task and challenge of genuine reformers in both the regimes and oppositions of the Arab World and South Asia to chart an exit from the cul-de-sac of arbitrary rule and state-managed political reform by defining a common vision of substantive “democratic transformation.”

We believe that the administration can and should assist in this effort. “Articulated in a respectful, matter-of-fact language that abjures preaching or triumphalism,” (Recommendation 4) support for democracy by our highest officials will not only buttress U.S. security interests: it will also advance President Obama’s vision of a new relationship between the U.S. and Muslim majority states, a vision whose parameters he boldly set out during his June 4, 2009 Cairo speech.

In encouraging the Obama administration to forge a strategy that links security to democratic change, we offer what we believe to be a politically feasible long-term strategy, one that is far preferable to either relying on the status quo, on the one hand, or trying to rapidly undermine it by promoting regime change, on the other.

In much of the Arab World, this status quo consists of a system of state-managed, tactical political liberalization that is designed to fend off, rather than to sustain, substantive democratization. As we argue in Findings 9 through 17, while it might appear that semi-autocracy provides for internal stability, in the long term it fosters a debilitating cycle of political liberalization and de-

liberalization. These bouts of political opening and closing rob regimes of what little legitimacy they once had. As we note in Finding 16, “state-managed liberalization can facilitate regime survival, but at the cost of making regimes vulnerable to domestic social conflicts, internal succession struggles, and regional disputes.”

The challenge for advocates of genuine reform in Muslim majority states is to find a way to move beyond the boundaries of state-managed reform, but without inviting a process of internal ideological, social and identity conflicts that would only give regimes good cause to slam the door shut on the reform agenda.

Towards this end, in Recommendations 10 through 13 we set out the elements of a two-fold process of “strategic political liberalization” and “gradual democratic transformation.” Both dynamics require moving beyond a system of U.S. democracy development assistance that has largely relied on “the capacity of civil society groups to demand reforms to one that gives states and their ruling cadres a major role in supplying democratic changes.” For this to happen, U.S. leaders and policymakers must:

Deploy a mix of private and high-level public diplomacy to encourage ruling elites to replace short-term tactical reforms with long-term programs that build the legal and institutional infrastructure for democratic representation. Regimes must be encouraged to repeal the array of exceptional laws, defamation codes, political party registration statutes and religiously based laws that ... hinder free expression and assembly.

This process must go hand-in-hand with increased U.S. support for:

Civil society organizations that have the capacity to strengthen fundamental democratic institutions and processes. Election monitoring organizations, human rights groups and advocacy organizations that promote parliamentary accountability ... are just some of the civil society organizations that can link up to and enhance the capacity of political society, thus advancing a transition from state-managed liberalization to democratic transformation.

Ultimately, enhanced U.S. support for a process of strategic liberalization should create a more level playing field. The constraints and incentives deriving from genuine political competition will not only encourage mainstream Islamist parties to adopt more moderate, consensus-based positions; it should also “reduce the perceived risks of all key actors in regimes and oppositions,” (Recommendation 10-D), thus opening up prospects for a sustained process of democratic transformation.

This dynamic will also require U.S. support for a policy of “democratic engagement.” As we note in Recommendations 14 and 15, by holding a series of

frank meetings and dialogues with both regimes and oppositions, American diplomats and policymakers will be better positioned to encourage a process of political accommodation and “pact making” that helps narrow the gap between states and societies.

Some argue that such a process of accommodation could hamper the capacity of regimes to cooperate with the U.S. on strategic matters. However, our case studies indicate that the reverse is true. The experiences of Egypt, Jordan, Yemen and Pakistan all suggest that by associating their repressive policies with U.S. foreign policies, autocracies effectively foster anti-U.S. sentiment.

Conversely, if it is genuine and inclusive of all political forces that reject the use of violence, regime opposition accommodation should increase regime legitimacy, thus enhancing the capacity of Muslim majority states to work with the U.S. in confronting domestic and regional security challenges.

For these reasons, we believe that the administration should “signal to its allies that the U.S. will move along multiple tracks by remaining focused on democratic reform as it advocates negotiations to end regional conflicts” (Recommendation 9). While peacemaking must involve a process of engaging autocratic regimes, we believe that:

The U.S. should make it clear to its interlocutors that engagement does not preclude defending universal principles. ... A continued, high-level U.S. commitment to human rights must be a vital part of a comprehensive security strategy (Recommendation 8).

There is no doubt that the administration’s FY10 request for democracy and governance assistance programs could play a key role in advancing many of the proposals set out above. We applaud the administration for requesting \$1.54 billion for such programs - “twice the amount requested for FY09” (Finding 19). At the same time, insofar as some 86 percent of this aid will go to Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq, we are concerned that the administration may be signaling a decreased emphasis on the need for political reform in the wider Arab World.

Moreover, and most vitally, absent U.S. verbal support for democratic reform, increased aid is unlikely to provide sufficient incentives for encouraging strategic political liberalization and democratic transformation. The president and secretary of state, and those who speak in their names, will enhance U.S. security by offering clear and consistent rhetorical support for policies that encourage regimes and oppositions to come to the table of democratic negotiation.

## **PART II: COUNTRY STUDIES**

### **Egypt: Reforming Autocracy versus Promoting Democracy**

**Finding 9:** While state-managed political reform has eroded the legitimacy of the Egyptian government, and while it has failed to keep pace with the rising challenge posed by new social and political forces, this erosion will not necessarily lead to regime collapse. ... Nevertheless, cycles of political opening and closure have widened the gap between state and society. By raising and deflating elite and popular expectations of change, state-managed reform has heightened the system's vulnerability to systematic domestic crises and exogenous economic, political or security shocks. The long-term security interests of the U.S., and, we believe, Egypt, would be best served by a U.S. policy that helps Egypt's ruling and opposition elites shape an effective and feasible strategy for exiting the trap of state-managed, semi-autocracy.

**Recommendation 1:** If the administration seeks to realize the promise represented in the president's June 4 Cairo speech, and even more so, if it does not intend on signaling diminished U.S. support for political change in Egypt, it must take actions that demonstrate Washington's desire to encourage democratic transformation, even in a context of an enhanced security relationship with Egypt. Towards this end, this study group recommends that Washington engage the emerging generation of Egyptian NDP leaders in a frank dialogue regarding the role of democratization in reinforcing the legitimacy of the Egyptian government.

**Recommendation 4:** U.S. policymakers should make public diplomacy a key part of any effort to promote democratic change in Egypt. President Obama's June 4 speech was a very good start; but, unless American officials, including the secretary of state, are willing to openly praise Egyptian officials for taking reform measures that hold out a promise of democratization, or to criticize the Egyptian officials when they adopt laws or take measures that restrict democratic and human rights, Egyptian officials will very likely conclude that Washington has returned to a policy of realpolitik.

### **Jordan: Security Trumps Reform**

**Finding 5:** While the multifaceted Jordanian-U.S. partnership has enhanced the domestic security of the Jordanian state, over time it has eroded the political legitimacy of the regime. ... Many Jordanians view their country's relationship as one of dependency on, and thus subservience to, U.S. security agendas and priorities. As a result, since 1989 domestic opposition to the regime has either been sparked by, or has tended to crystallize around, popular and elite opposition to regional developments associated with U.S. and Israeli security initiatives. ... Seeking to deflect internal opposition, Jordan's leaders have backtracked on previous political openings. Thus, "every unpopular U.S. measure in the last 15 years has been accompanied by a reduction in political freedoms."

**Finding 6:** Amman’s active support for the Bush administration’s “War on Terror” was undercut at home by the “passing over of 100 temporary laws all designed to curb political freedoms.” Moreover, the credibility of U.S. support for democracy in Jordan has suffered directly as a result of the close association between de-liberalization and Amman’s support for U.S.-backed regional security initiatives. Because many Jordanians attribute cycles of political opening and closure to what they perceive as Washington’s lukewarm support of the first and its implicit backing for the second, the legitimate efforts of Jordan’s leaders to confront domestic and regional security threats do not benefit from sufficient popular support or legitimacy. This is a recipe for long-term domestic instability.

**Finding 8:** Although political openings could facilitate Islamist mobilization of opposition to the U.S., it does not necessarily follow that democratic reform must inevitably undercut the efforts of Jordan’s leaders to work closely with Washington or even Israel. While many Islamist politicians oppose these efforts, public opinion polls taken in the wake of Jordan’s peace treaty with Israel demonstrated that 80 percent of Jordanians supported the treaty, providing that it “would bring more economic development, a resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and a more ‘friendly’ U.S. stance in the region.” It is because these hopes have been repeatedly disappointed that Islamists are able to use elections as a means of mobilizing opposition to Washington, and by association, to the pro-Western policies adopted by successive Jordanian governments.

**Recommendation 1:** This study group applauds the Obama administration’s determination to advance Palestinian-Israeli peacemaking. But while recognizing that successful peacemaking could open up space for democratic reform, we believe that Jordan’s long-term political stability could be undermined by a policy that completely subordinates the challenge of democracy to the exigencies of regional security. Thus, we urge the Obama administration to demonstrate through both words and deeds a renewed U.S. interest in supporting efforts at democratic transformation in Jordan.

### **Lebanon: Beyond Confessional Insecurity?**

**Finding 5:** Diplomatic initiatives aimed at promoting national reconciliation and sovereignty are unlikely to succeed if they outstrip the capacity of the country’s fragile consensual system to sustain feasible political reforms. This was the case during the 2005 to 2007 period, when outside actors took positions that at times exacerbated the dispute between the pro-Syrian/Iran “March 8 Coalition” and the pro-Western “March 14 Coalition.” Indeed, while Washington’s staunch rhetorical defense of the 2005 “Cedar Revolution” was meant to strengthen Lebanese democracy, absent a negotiated solution acceptable to both sides (and that was backed by key regional players), U.S. diplomacy failed to help Lebanese leaders forge a strategy for exiting their escalating conflict.

**Finding 10:** Many Lebanese have welcomed President Obama's efforts to define a new basis for a broader dialogue with the Muslim World. Signaled by his June 4 Cairo speech, if this rhetorical effort is bolstered by a clear policy of active U.S. support for an inclusive process of national reconciliation and political reform, it could help the Lebanese move beyond the instabilities of sectarian power sharing. If, on the other hand, the words and actions of top U.S. policymakers appear to unduly favor one particular faction, the promise represented in Obama's new vision will not be realized. In addressing the complexities of Lebanon's fragile politics, the President must balance the alluring strategic logic of backing Washington's closest Lebanese allies with the political logic of promoting a wider dynamic that gives potential adversaries of the U.S. a stake in Lebanese reform.

**Recommendation 4:** The U.S. should avoid taking positions on the course of Lebanon's internal politics that suggest an effort to isolate or exclude any political party. Moreover, the U.S. should avoid trying to use its military, diplomatic or economic leverage to force a drastic change in the existing rules of the confessional power sharing system, or to support the efforts of any group to unilaterally alter these rules. Because such efforts invariably intensify sectarian conflict, the U.S. should provide diplomatic and economic support for a serious and sustained national dialogue aimed at moving beyond confessional politics.

### **Morocco: Liberalizing Apathy?**

**Finding 6:** If political liberalization and economic reform have unfolded without destabilizing Morocco, both processes have occurred in the absence of sustained and substantive democratization. "The main risk" today is that Morocco "will reach its outer limits in a kind of stalled semi-authoritarianism that is less resilient when confronting the major political and security challenges that lie ahead." Liberalization absent democratization could eventually undermine the effectiveness and legitimacy of Morocco's political establishment, its institutions and its leaders.

**Finding 13:** High-level praise by U.S. diplomats, policymakers and national representatives of Morocco's "democratic experiment" has sometimes had the unintended effect of abetting a liberalization strategy that has failed to strengthen ... the country's representative and judicial institutions. A more balanced and constructively critical stance would help the country's leaders address the political, economic and security challenges they now face.

**Recommendation 3:** Where appropriate, U.S. policymakers at the highest levels should use a mix of both public and private diplomacy to accentuate the political challenges Morocco faces. Rather than describing Morocco as a "paragon of reform" or the Arab World's "leading democratizer," American officials should offer a balanced and realistic assessment of the actual strengths and weaknesses of the political system. A shift in language could enhance the

leverage of genuine reformers, while also encouraging a genuine and productive dialogue between ruling and opposition elites regarding the benefits of genuine but gradual democratization.

### **Yemen: A Narrow Counterterrorism Lens**

**Finding 12:** Democratic reform may seem like a luxury Yemen cannot afford in the context of the deteriorating security situation. However, a long-term strategy of democratic transformation could in fact help to reverse the regime's escalating legitimacy crisis, thus giving it the domestic leverage it requires to tackle social, economic and national security challenges. President Saleh desperately needs to share the blame for, and burden of, improving a deteriorating economic situation by sharing power with national institutions, local government and local leaders. Moreover, he needs to regain legitimacy that has been lost in the course of a brutal campaign against Houthi insurgents in the north and against the southern secessionist movement. In both cases, elements within these opposition groups are still willing to compromise and negotiate. But, the price will certainly be a degree of political power sharing, as well as improved stewardship of the national economy that facilitates development in the geographic periphery.

**Recommendation 1:** The Obama administration must widen the aperture beyond counterterrorism to include critical issues of political and economic reform. Political power sharing, decentralization, transparency and endemic corruption must be addressed to achieve the U.S. goal of effectively combating the instability that provides fodder for al-Qaeda. In practice, widening the aperture means augmenting diplomatic and development instruments of power in Yemen. The Obama administration has already increased economic aid, but this aid must be delivered in the context of a new diplomatic strategy. U.S. diplomats in Sanaa and in Washington must communicate clearly to President Saleh that the U.S. sees a direct connection between genuine economic and political reform and improved domestic security conditions. In addition to conveying this message privately, the same must be said publicly.