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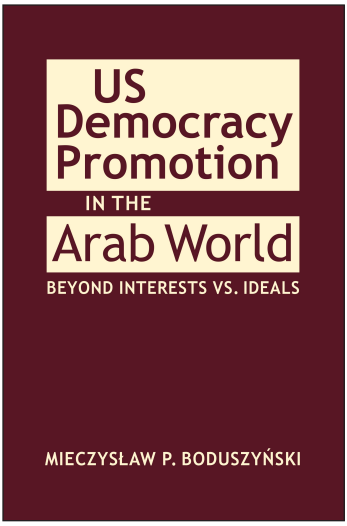
# US Democracy Promotion in the Arab World: Beyond Interests vs. Ideals

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# 1

# US Democracy Promotion in the Arab World

**On April 9, 2019, US president Donald J. Trump hosted Egyptian** strongman president Abdel Fatah al-Sisi in Washington. Trump lavished praise on Sisi and the US-Egyptian relationship, saying nothing about the Egyptian leader's abysmal human rights record (Landler 2019). This was, in fact, the second time Trump had warmly welcomed Sisi; his first visit to the White House was almost exactly two years earlier, in April 2017, barely three months into Trump's presidency. The image of the Egyptian leader twice sitting alongside the US president in the Oval Office spoke volumes about the priorities of the Trump administration: Sisi's autocratic order, which most observers have described as more repressive than that of the deposed former president Hosni Mubarak, would be overlooked by the Trump administration in the pursuit of shared concerns, such as fighting terrorism (Nakamura 2017). The administration's transactional approach was confirmed during Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's visit to Egypt in January 2019, when human rights and democracy were barely mentioned. Perhaps nowhere else has Trump's distaste for human rights and democracy promotion come into sharper relief than in his support for Saudi Arabia, a country that worked tirelessly to roll back democratic gains in places such as Egypt and Bahrain. In the fall of 2018, as evidence mounted that de facto Saudi ruler and crown prince Mohammed bin Salman had ordered the execution and dismemberment of a dissident journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, Trump and his top advisers made clear that they would defy even their fellow Republicans in Congress to stand by the Saudi ruler.

However, Barack Obama, Trump's predecessor, also did not impose serious costs on the Sisi regime for its increasing repression of political freedoms or on the Saudi monarchy for its counterdemocratic meddling in

Egypt and other countries. While Obama never gave Egyptian president Sisi the highly prized platform of a White House visit, by the end of his presidency he had long retreated from the full-throated support he had offered to Egyptians and other Arabs who rose up in 2011 to demand change. In 2013, only two years after uprisings swept across the Arab world, the Obama administration remained largely silent as the Egyptian military, backed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), carried out a coup against democratically elected president Mohamed Morsi.[1] In his second term, Obama largely gave up on democracy promotion in the Arab world and diverted his attention to other foreign policy priorities.

In the years after the Arab Spring, euphoria turned to dysphoria as the aspirations of the youthful protesters were usurped by resurgent authoritarianism, civil wars, and terrorist groups. Tunisia was the only Arab Spring country in which the uprisings helped to usher in democracy. A sense of resignation took hold in Washington, accompanied by the belief that, compared to the chaos that has engulfed the region since 2011, autocracy no longer looked so bad. For the many US policymakers who harbored deep skepticism about the prospects for democracy in the Arab world, the aftermath of the Arab Spring was a self-fulfilling prophecy. To be sure, amidst the disorder of the post-2011 period, many Arabs, even those who had supported the uprisings, also began to express nostalgia for the certainty of authoritarianism.

But the fatalism that has engulfed Washington and other Western capitals, which sees Arab democratization as destined to fail and the United States as helpless in encouraging its success, may also be misguided. There is no question that the internal obstacles to democracy in the region were substantial: from a lack of institutions in Libya to deeply entrenched autocratic ones in Egypt, and from ethno-sectarian fragmentation in the Levant to the "resource curse" of the Gulf Arab states. Thus, I do not mean to suggest that democracy would have inevitably taken hold in the Arab Spring countries had the United States taken a consistently principled stance toward democratic reform. But I also see a problem with the argument, often repeated by government officials, that the United States did not have any leverage over post–Arab Spring developments. How can they be sure of this if they rarely, if ever, tested US leverage in the region in a meaningful way? For example, all too often, Washington threatened to cut off assistance in response to repression, but its bluff was called by Arab autocrats. And when the United States did suspend assistance, repression increased after it was reinstated. The fact is that the United States potentially had *some* leverage, but for reasons to be explained in this book, chose not to use it. While in retrospect the unsuccessful democratic transitions that followed the Arab Spring might be looked at with a sense of inevitability, at the time of the uprisings and in their immediate aftermath

neither the United States nor local actors could definitively predict the final outcome. As Vali Nasr (2014, p. 163), a former official in Hillary Clinton's State Department, points out, nobody in Washington knew what path the Arab uprisings might take in 2011, "nor can we say now that the Arab Spring would have been such a disappointment had we engaged with the region quickly and forcefully."

Nasr's observation points to the lack of resolve in the US foreign policy community to advance the idea of Arab democracy, reflecting deep-seated beliefs among Washington policymakers about the poor prospects for democratization in the Arab and Muslim worlds, fears of political Islam and terrorism, and disappointment with the chaotic course of post–Arab Spring transitions. But the lack of resolve is also a function of bureaucratic interests and inertia. Indeed, the individuals and institutions responsible for formulating and implementing US democracy promotion efforts were sometimes the ones that undermined those efforts because they do not agree on what American interests in the Arab world are, including how best to achieve that vague and elusive concept known as "stability."

## Overview of the Book

This book is about US democracy promotion in the Arab world since the uprisings of 2010–2011. In the decades leading up to the Arab Spring, the region remained in the deep freeze of authoritarianism. If Arab states were exceptional in their ability to resist democratization, US policy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) was also exceptional in its continuing focus on making pacts with Arab dictators in the name of stability rather than supporting the aspirations of ordinary people (Wittes 2008, p. 1). In Washington, DC, Arab democracy had few champions: Only a handful of interest groups advocated for US democracy promotion in the Arab world, none with the funding and influence of groups pushing for other foreign policy priorities. Congress rarely took up the issue of Arab democracy. Meanwhile, the US public was largely ignorant of the daily indignities suffered by ordinary Arab citizens at the hands of their regimes.

To some extent, this changed after 9/11, when American policymakers woke up to the idea that political repression, instability, and religious extremism might be linked, and as a result President George W. Bush launched an ambitious "Freedom Agenda" of worldwide democracy promotion in which he included the Arab world with great fanfare. But Bush's efforts were short-lived and derailed by the disastrous consequences of the Iraq War, overreach in the global war on terror, and an unwillingness to meaningfully challenge allied Arab autocratic regimes. Moreover, many institutions in the US foreign policy apparatus had continued a

business-as-usual approach during the Freedom Agenda, talking to Arab authoritarian governments rather than ordinary people and relying on their intelligence services to understand developments (Panetta 2014, p. 303). By the end of Bush's presidency, few Arabs saw US intentions around democracy promotion as sincere (Telhami 2011).

The Arab Spring presented entirely new opportunities for US democracy promotion. Perhaps for the first time ever, democratization appeared as a possibility in a region that had resisted previous "waves" of democratic change sweeping the globe (Huntington 1993). Now, millions of ordinary Arabs from Morocco in the west to Oman in the east took to the streets to demand change. In Washington, the dilemma was no longer over whether and how much to prod an Arab strongman or monarch to open the political space here or there while never meaningfully challenging the durability of his rule, which was essentially the policy pursued under Bush. Now, such space had been opened in new and dramatic ways, and the agent of change was neither an Islamist nor a US Marine, but rather young Arabs calling for an end to dictatorship—and in some cases succeeding. US policymakers, in turn, faced stark policy choices: whether to stand or break with autocratic allies, and whether to encourage a process of democratic change with uncertain outcomes. If the United States had historically relied on authoritarian Arab regimes to expand Washington's influence, contain Iran, guarantee Israel's security, and protect access to oil resources, the Arab Spring decisively challenged the idea that autocracies could guarantee stability and uphold US interests. It was hard to argue that the US should uphold the status quo for the sake of stability when there was no stability. The challenge of the Arab Spring, then, was not only to the nondemocratic exceptionalism of the Arab world but also to the exceptionalism of US policy toward the region.

I tackle two tasks in this book. The first is to tell the story of US democracy promotion in the Arab world since 2011. A large part of the book focuses on the record of the Obama administration. Sufficient distance and the power of hindsight, as well as access to new sources on Obama's foreign policy, allow for the analysis of decisionmaking during these years. Obama's response to the Arab Spring simultaneously reflected both enthusiasm for and ambivalence about the prospects for democracy in the region. The policy was frequently reactive and inconsistent, with a mismatch between rhetoric and action. It featured courageous and dramatic policy moves such as the decision to drop support for Mubarak and to intervene in Libya. Yet it was also characterized by mixed messages and lack of strategy. After 2013, the general trajectory of the policy was clear: from an initial embrace of the protests and their aspirations, to a noble but restrained effort to push a democratic transition, and finally to a loss of resolve and a retreat from democracy promotion in the region, a retreat that has been furthered by the Trump administration's policies, which I cover in the last chapter.

The second task of the book is to explain this policy trajectory. US foreign policy dilemmas in the Arab world are often cast in terms of a tension between interests and ideals, with the former inevitably trumping the latter, thereby constraining democracy promotion. However, in this book I argue that it is not possible to understand outcomes in democracy promotion, or US foreign policy more generally, without appreciating the human, bureaucratic, and regional context from which it emerged.

## Contributions to Scholarship

The larger question addressed in the book is where, why, and how the United States incorporates democracy promotion into its foreign policy, which in turn offers an opportunity to engage with several research traditions. In my effort to explain outcomes in US foreign policy, I aim to build upon the foreign-policy analysis tradition of Snyder (1962), Holsti (1976), Rosenau (1980), George (1980), Allison (1971), Janis (1972), and Saunders (2011). These scholars highlight the importance of learning about the narratives behind foreign policy decisions and encourage the use of midrange theories that push beyond the assumptions of international relations paradigms so as to capture the multiple influences on US foreign policy.

I also engage the literature on democracy promotion, which has grown in tandem with the end of the Cold War and the expansion of US democracy promotion to new parts of the world. There is now an impressive body of scholarship on why and how the United States and other states and multilateral organizations choose to promote democracy, and whether such policies work.[2] Some of this literature is descriptive, some is prescriptive, and less frequently it is theoretical. Yet, the Arab world is rarely mentioned in this body of work,[3] perhaps because there has been so little in the way of US democracy promotion in the region.[4] In this book, I aim to contribute to this body of research, especially those works that purport to explain the inclusion of democracy promotion in US foreign policy and variations in its application over time and space.[5]

My analysis of US democracy promotion in the Arab world engages another domain of scholarship, that on the international dimension of democratization. The "transitology" literature of the 1980s and 1990s largely omitted the influence of external powers.[6] By contrast, more recent research has found that it was "externally driven shifts in the cost of suppression, not changes in domestic conditions" that "contributed most centrally to the demise of authoritarianism in the 1980s and 1990s" (Levitsky and Way 2010). While much of the existing research focuses on whether and how external forces influence democratic change,[7] this book focuses

on the factors that shape the will, policies, and capacity of democracy-promoting states such as the United States. In other words, rather than focusing on regime outcomes in Arab states as a dependent variable, this book is concerned with the determinants of the "prodemocracy" content of US foreign policy toward the MENA region. In my analysis of third-party spoilers of democratization (or "challengers"), I also engage the growing literature on autocracy promotion.[8]

While many academic and "trade" books, in addition to numerous articles in scholarly journals and the media, have analyzed the causes, events, and outcomes of the Arab Spring,[9] there remains a dearth of rigorous, scholarly analysis of US policy toward the region during and after this critical period in spite of the fact that the United States was the external actor with the greatest potential to influence developments.[10] Though this book is concerned mainly with the determinants of US democracy promotion policies rather than the internal dynamics of Arab states, I hope that my analysis will also contribute to our understanding of regime survival and change in MENA.

## The Significance of the Arab Spring for US Democracy Promotion

The events of 2011 and the years that followed represented a *critical moment for US democracy promotion,* one in which a political opening in an autocratic regime creates not only prospects for domestic change in a democratic direction, but also an opportunity for external actors to apply heightened levels of democratic leverage. The period after the Arab Spring was a critical moment not because the United States or any other external actor was a catalyst for the uprisings—indeed, the fact that protests were entirely locally driven substantially boosted their legitimacy—but because they presented an opportunity for the United States to seize a locally induced political opening and respond in a way that advanced the calls for freedom.

Critical moments for US democracy promotion occur when there are protests against an authoritarian regime, but they may also be triggered by a multitude of events such as a coup in which the military overthrows a democratically elected leader, the refusal of an authoritarian leader to step down, the launch of negotiations to transfer power, when an election pits democratic against autocratic forces, or when another crisis occurs that could determine a democratic transition or reversion to authoritarianism. During and after the Arab Spring, furthermore, existing structures and institutions were potentially more malleable and susceptible to external democratizing pressures. At such moments, I argue, the United States has an opportunity

to advance democratization. The United States has seized upon critical moments for democracy promotion before: in the Philippines in 1986, in South Korea in 1987, in Haiti in 1994, in Serbia in 2000, and in Côte d'Ivoire in 2011. In all of these cases, US presidents, albeit at times belatedly, stood on the side of democratic principles and deployed a range of tools to encourage a democratic outcome.

As a result of the events of the Arab Spring, opportunities for democracy promotion appeared in *autocratic allies,* nondemocratic regimes with whom the United States had long maintained close ties and provided security assistance, arguably giving Washington added leverage and an augmented motive to stand on the side of democracy. The United States had faced such critical moments in autocratic allies before. Two of the cases mentioned above, the Philippines and South Korea, are examples since they were both authoritarian regimes pivotal to the US Cold War strategy of containing Soviet influence. This fact complicated, but also enabled, democracy promotion as close ties, assistance, and security guarantees gave the United States substantial leverage. In both countries, then president Ronald Reagan and his advisers realized that it was no longer in the US interest to prop up ruling regimes because they were understood to be unstable.[11]

While the protagonists of Arab Spring were local actors, it is also a misreading of the extent of decades of US entanglement in the region to think that the US could avoid playing a role in what was happening, especially when it came to its autocratic allies. The survival of a number of regimes in the region, such as Egypt and the monarchies of Jordan and the Gulf Arab states, have depended to a large degree on US support. If US policies could help keep nondemocratic Arab regimes in power, then they should have the leverage to influence reform in a democratic direction. Nevertheless, there were those in the Obama administration who argued that the Arab uprisings were not about the United States and that therefore Washington should avoid any perception of meddling. Michael McFaul (2018, p. 214), a senior adviser to President Obama and a scholar of democratization and democracy promotion, writes that at the time of the Arab Spring he wondered privately "why these sovereignty champions had been so quiet during decades of American subsidization of Egyptian autocracy." Analysts such as Shadi Hamid (2015) have been similarly critical of the argument that the United States could not and should not influence post–Arab Spring events: "Where is the line between inaction and complicity? The notion of neutrality, for a country as powerful as the United States, is illusory. Doing nothing or 'doing no harm' means maintaining the status quo, which in the Middle East is never neutral, due to America's longstanding relationships with regional actors." Beyond this, would it have been morally feasible for the United States

just to stand by and say or do nothing as millions of Arabs took to the streets to demand change?

The Arab Spring and its aftermath were also a critical moment for democracy promotion given the broad post-9/11 consensus that the internal dynamics of states—especially their practices vis-à-vis democracy and human rights—cannot not be divorced from the fight against violent extremism. The publication of an Arab Human Development Report in 2002[12] painted a dire picture of the state of freedom and economic opportunity in the region and was a wake-up call to many in the foreign policy establishment (Rice 2017). Even staunch realists such as then secretary of state Colin Powell could not ignore the connection between the sick state of Arab governments and societies on one hand and religious extremism on the other. As Condoleezza Rice, who succeeded Powell as secretary of state, put it, "the fundamental character of regimes now matters more than the international distribution of power."[13] It was no longer the lonely voices of activists, think tanks, and human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) calling for Arab democracy in Washington policy circles.

In January 2011, just days before Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali relinquished power in Tunisia and the start of the Egyptian protests, then secretary of state Hillary Clinton gave a speech in Doha, Qatar, in which she highlighted the inability of Arab governments to meet their populations' aspirations using the poignant phrase, "the region's foundations are sinking in the sand."[14] While Clinton proposed only vague reforms, in retrospect the speech was a prescient one. Around the same time, key members of Obama's National Security Council were leading a policy review, or Presidential Study Directive, which concluded that the MENA region was ripe for reform and that the United States should adjust its policy accordingly (Sanger 2012). The intelligence community also produced studies that pointed to trouble for the authoritarian Arab regimes (Morrell 2016, p. 178). In other words, after 9/11 the issue of democratic reform in Arab societies and regimes moved to the center of US foreign policy debates. The Arab Spring should have only reinforced the imperative for a new approach.

The nature of the Arab Spring also defied many expectations about what kind of revolutions would take place in the Arab world. The uprisings challenged the assumption of some "neoconservative" thinkers that the United States needs to serve as the external catalyst of regime change. In fact, the Arab Spring's slogans and tactics diffused among the countries of the region (Lynch 2012) in a way that had little to do with the United States or other non-Arab powers. Contrary to the expectations of some in Washington, the protesters focused their ire on the failings of their own leaders and not foreign threats and enemies. And, contrary to conventional wisdom that the Muslim Brotherhood would inevitably lead any revolution, Islamists were not at the forefront of the Arab Spring protests.

## The Limits of "National Interest" in Explaining US Democracy Promotion

The realist tradition in international relations maintains that policies such as democracy promotion will only emerge when security or vital economic interests are not at stake.[15] This view is supported by a long tradition in US foreign policy of relying upon autocratic allies in the service of counterbalancing foes. The United States benefited from alliances with the French monarchy during the American Revolution and the Soviet communist dictatorship during World War II to balance the British and Nazi threats, respectively. Throughout the Cold War, the United States maintained ties with right-wing dictatorships in Latin America, Africa, and other regions so as to balance the Soviet Union and contain the spread of communism. In the 1980s, the United States cultivated relations with Saddam Hussein's Iraq as a way to balance revolutionary Iran, looking the other way as Saddam used chemical weapons against his own citizens.

Realism might suggest that US interests are irreconcilable with the goal of promoting democracy in the Arab world. Yet, after 9/11 two successive US presidents and their surrogates argued that in fact there should be no tension between the two: Because political repression breeds both extremism and instability, promoting democracy and human rights should be easily reconciled with US interests. If interests were wholly incompatible with democracy promotion, then perhaps the United States would never promote democracy anywhere in the Arab world, and yet it has tried to do so at key junctures after 9/11. Conversely, if interests and values were fully harmonious, then the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama would have easily reconciled the two, rather than ultimately backing away from democracy promotion in the Arab world. As Thomas Carothers (2004, p. 36) has written, in the end democracy promotion cannot be easily characterized as "a grand synthesis of idealism and realism."

Realism assumes the existence of an overarching "national interest." However, given the presence of multiple actors in the US foreign policy process, *whose* interests are at stake? For example, how can the Department of Defense's views on Egypt, where it has maintained a decades-long relationship with the Egyptian military, be reconciled with ideas about the importance of transition to civilian rule coming from parts of the White House, State Department, and US Agency for International Development (USAID)? What's more, can't interests change? Shouldn't the growing energy independence of the United States lead Washington to rethink its ties and military obligations in the Gulf? Such questions challenge the idea of a unified, objective, immutable, a priori identifiable US "national interest" in the Arab world that either constrains or supports democracy promotion. My aim is not to discount the influence of national interest entirely; rather, by

using democracy promotion as an example, I seek to modify how we conceive of interest in explaining US policies toward the Middle East and North Africa.

There are many well-known instances of US foreign policy that cannot be easily explained by a priori existing, objectively identifiable interests. Consider US support for Israel, which has continued for decades despite complicating US relations with many Arab states. Mearsheimer and Walt (2007) have argued that pro-Israel policies run counter to the US interest, if for no other reason than that they inflame public opinion in the Middle East, adversely affecting US leverage over and relationships with Arab states. Or, consider another well-known case of US foreign policy: the longstanding economic embargo against Cuba that was in place prior to Obama's 2015 rapprochement with Havana. After the Cold War ended, it was hard to argue that a small island nation represented a strategic threat to the United States, and quite the contrary, there were economic incentives for the United States to engage with the Castro regime. And yet, the United States continued to pursue a policy of isolation that did little to change the character of the Cuban regime. It is hard to argue that these policies advanced the US interest in the realist understanding of the term. Instead, in both the Israel and Cuba cases, domestic interest groups—a well-organized and funded pro-Israel lobby and a conservative Cuban American voting bloc in Florida—contributed to shaping the foreign policy preferences of both elites and the public concerning US policies toward the two countries.

### *Counterterrorism and US Democracy Promotion in the Arab World*

Countervailing interests such as counterterrorism do provide some explanation for the failure to follow through on post-9/11 promises of US democracy promotion in the Arab world. Democracy promotion policies push autocratic governments to "relinquish power across state institutions and to their citizenry," while cooperating on counterterrorism is easier when dealing with a strong, central leader (Hassan 2015, p. 480). Counterterrorism in particular is in tension with democracy promotion because it often reflects short-term considerations, while democracy is a longer-term goal that requires strategic patience. For instance, the use of armed drones relies heavily on cooperative regimes, ones that can respond quickly and discreetly while avoiding the "messiness" associated with democratic procedures.

Short-term thinking about counterterrorism also influenced the Bush administration's "extraordinary rendition" program in the 2000s, by which captured terrorism suspects were transferred to third countries for interrogation, and often torture. In Yemen, the Obama administration deferred to the Saudis and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to negotiate the resignation of strongman Ali Abdullah Saleh and the formation of an interim

government to guarantee that the security apparatus needed for cooperation on drones and other counterterrorism programs remained in place (Nasr 2014, p. 181). In this manner, the short-term goal of locating and killing terrorists on foreign territory can "tie the hands" of the United States in promoting democracy (Nasr 2014, p. 181) while also raising questions about US complicity in human rights abuses and civilian deaths. Huber (2015, p. 702) refers to the tension between short-term and long-term interests as the "democracy dilemma": From the long-term perspective, it might be ethical or even strategic for the United States to pursue democracy promotion, but in the short term it can be a risky policy, especially when applied in allied autocracies that also serve as reliable partners on counterterrorism cooperation. Thus, even as the Arab Spring exposed the fragility of authoritarianism, it also gave rise to a great deal of uncertainty, which in turn posed a direct threat to counterterrorism and other short-term interests. Yet, the fact that years of counterterrorism cooperation failed to prevent the rapid expansion of the Islamic State and other terrorist groups raises questions about the effectiveness of the approach.

### *Assumptions About Stability*

Many in Washington assume that alliances with autocratic states are stable. However, McFaul (2010, pp. 111–115) argues that the United States cannot depend on alliances with autocrats in the long run. First, autocratic regimes have no predictable or legitimate way to hand over power, meaning that transitions are precarious. Second, the struggle of autocracies to stay in power radicalizes opponents who might otherwise be moderated by the influence of elections. Third, since they do not answer to parliaments or voters, autocratic leaders can change their international allegiances unpredictably, which can be detrimental to US interests (witness Joseph Stalin after World War II).[16] Fourth, as I will discuss further below, autocratic allies extract "tremendous military and economic subsidies," which may sometimes be necessary (protecting South Korea against the North, for instance) but at other times is not the most effective way to pursue the national interest (McFaul 2010, p. 114). Fifth, the internal stability of many autocratic regimes, and by extension US alliances with them, is threatened by their inability to provide jobs and prosperity more generally (Wittes 2008, p. 57). Finally, supporting autocracy extracts a heavy price in terms of US credibility on the world stage.

At first glance, the Arab Spring might have convinced Washington policymakers that authoritarianism was inherently unstable, "producing the very problems [the United States] relied on it to contain" (Nasr 2014, p. 167). Instead, disillusionment about the outcome of the Arab Spring has led many in Washington and other Western capitals to revive the idea that only authoritarian Arab leaders can keep a lid on instability and terrorism.

However, it is worth taking a hard look at whether American alliances with Arab autocracies—countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and the Gulf monarchies—actually deliver the stability their US proponents assume that they provide.

Even the resource-rich Gulf monarchies, which rely upon extensive oil and gas revenues to purchase the acquiescence of their populations, are not immune from popular revolt and other forms of instability. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's push for social and economic reform and his moves against allegedly corrupt elites (including members of the Saudi royal family) reflect a recognition on his part that simply buying off citizens with subsidies cannot achieve stability in the long term (Cohen 2018), while his increasing reliance on brutal forms of repression points to the insecurity of the regime. Despite questions about long-term stability and Saudi Arabia's deplorable record on democracy and human rights, a strong bipartisan consensus in Washington has dictated that it is in the national interest to maintain strong ties to the Saudi monarchy and other Gulf autocracies. Many of the Washington policymakers who cheered the downfall of Ben Ali, Mubarak, and Muammar Qaddafi in 2011 said almost nothing about America's strong ties to equally repressive and corrupt Arab dictatorships in the Persian Gulf. In fact, until recently few in Washington policy circles have dared to seriously question exactly why a robust relationship with Riyadh or Abu Dhabi is essential.[17] As Chapter 6 will detail, the 2018 assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi produced unprecedented levels of bipartisan anger, and helped catalyze a resolution to end US involvement in the Saudi-led war in Yemen (Edmondson 2019), but it remains to be seen whether this will be translated into more far-reaching policy changes vis-à-vis the Saudi-US relationship.

### *Do Security Relationships Buy the United States Leverage?*

There is also an assumption among some Washington foreign policy elites that long-standing relationships with autocratic Arab regimes gives the United States leverage over these states. However, evidence suggests that often the opposite is true. Security partnerships and the presence of US bases create the need to keep local partners "happy," which reduces diplomatic influence over a range of issues, democracy promotion included. Ruling monarchies in states such as Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain where the United States maintains military facilities know that the US military will not easily give up the valuable assets in their countries and therefore feel empowered to pursue internal repression and human rights abuses, all while "free riding" on US security guarantees. As one former senior official told me, "we think we are buying influence, when we are offering ourselves up as a hostage."[18] Some Department of Defense officials also argue that mil-

itary ties afford the United States democratic leverage over Arab rulers. However, despite many years of US military engagement, assistance, and sales, the Middle East is no more democratic, not to mention stable, than it was since US involvement in the region intensified.

But it is not just that US support for autocratic Arab allies gives them the space to carry out domestic political repression. It also gives them carte blanche to implement a wide range of policies outside their borders that are harmful to US interests. Saudi and Qatari money has supported the spread of fundamentalist interpretations of Islam around the world, and both countries have directly and indirectly backed jihadist fighters in foreign conflicts from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Syria. Since 2015, Saudi Arabia (at times with US logistical support and tacit approval) has carried out a military intervention in Yemen that has resulted in catastrophic civilian suffering. The UAE and Qatar, as Chapter 5 will detail, have supported rival militias in post-Qaddafi Libya, contributing to state and social fragmentation. The policies of the Gulf states also destabilize their own relations, thereby hurting US interests in the region. In 2017, a GCC crisis based on personality and ideology broke out between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and led to the imposition of an economic embargo against Doha. The United States has not been able to put a stop to these detrimental policies despite acting as the security guarantor for the Gulf Arab monarchies.

### *US Security Partnerships in the Middle East and Their Consequences*

US security relationships in the Arab world have entailed hundreds of billions of dollars in military aid and sales and include the presence of tens of thousands of US military personnel in the region. At this writing, there are approximately 52,612 US troops spread across the Middle East—with large military bases in Qatar (9,000 personnel), Bahrain (8,000 personnel), and Kuwait (15,600 personnel) and a smaller but significant presence in Iraq, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, and Syria.[19] US service members at these facilities perform a range of missions, from patrolling commercial sea routes to training allied militaries to participating in counterterrorism operations.[20] Over time, however, the bases have become more than operational centers. Indeed, they are independent power structures, with their own interests. The American diplomat and historian George Kennan offered an early warning on military commands established abroad, writing in his memoirs that an overseas base is not just an "instrument of American policy" but "a new bureaucratic power structure situated far from our shores and endowed with its own specific perspective on all problems of world policy."[21]

However, US security partnerships with Arab states are rooted in much more than bases. Sales of arms and military equipment help "lock

in" alliances and enable the "interoperability" of foreign and US militaries. US defense contractors earn tens of billions of dollars from military sales to Gulf countries; in the decade preceding the Arab Spring, over $72 billion in arms sales were approved for MENA countries ($10 billion of which went to Israel) (Thomas 2017).[22] These revenues are bolstered by the fact that Arab military partners prioritize expensive weapons such as fighters and tanks, even if they are not justified in terms of actual threats (Chollet 2016, p. 118). Consider the sales announced by the US government in the spring of 2018: $12 billion of F-15 fighter jets to Qatar and a staggering $110 billion worth of arms sales to Saudi Arabia—which, if it goes through, will be the single largest arms deal in American history (Filkins 2018). Security relationships also entail massive amounts of assistance to countries such as Jordan and Egypt. For example, between 1948 and 2016 the United States gave Egypt $77.4 billion in bilateral foreign aid, including $1.3 billion a year in military aid from 1987 to the present (Katzman 2017). As of 2019, US military assistance to Jordan totals approximately $400 million yearly, and total aid to the country over the past six decades has reached nearly $20 billion (Sharp 2018).

Security partnerships, as one top State Department official dealing with them admitted, "complicate" other foreign policy goals (Kaidanow 2017). Democracy promotion features prominently among these complications. The tension between maintaining security partnerships and promoting democracy comes to a head when we consider the role of the Department of Defense (DoD) in maintaining the partnerships. The literature on bureaucratic politics reviewed below hypothesizes that an institution is likely to "stand" where it "sits." Because the DoD "sits" on longstanding and multifaceted relationships with its counterparts in the Middle East, more often than not it "stands" on the side of stability, access, security, and force protection. Even when local, regional, and global dynamics might suggest that Washington should reassess the value of certain security partnerships, the reality is one of great inertia. From the perspective of the Pentagon, the costs of major shifts are simply perceived as being too high. While strategic considerations may have had primacy at the time security partnerships were first established, over time they have taken on a life of their own and become entrenched in multiple programs, sales, joint operations, and personal ties that link US and foreign military personnel.

### *Challenging the Rationale of US Military Partnerships in the Middle East*

One argument commonly used to justify US military commitments in the Gulf is the imperative of securing oil resources. Every US president since Nixon has said that the country's dependence on foreign oil is a matter of

national security (Rapier 2017). Toby Jones (2011a) argues that the American obsession with secure access to oil is rooted in the oil crises of the 1970s, when the Arab oil embargoes and the Iranian revolution constricted supply and helped push the US into recession. But as Jones (2011a) also points out, in today's world there is no shortage of oil thanks to new sources and extraction technologies. This is in part because the United States itself is energy independent thanks to fracking (or shale) technology. Obama's energy secretary, Ernest Moniz, called for a "new mentality" about America's energy position, with a "new political language to match" (Yergin 2013). Even before the fracking revolution, US energy dependence on the Middle East had declined as it bought more oil from countries such as Mexico, Canada, and Venezuela. However, access to domestic supplies does not insulate the United States entirely from oil price shocks: A shortage or high price in the Gulf can translate into higher prices everywhere else. At the same time, analysts point out that potential supply disruptions are actually less worrisome than scholars, politicians, and pundits presume (Gholz and Press 2010).

Close US allies such as Japan, South Korea, and European countries, however, do rely on Middle Eastern oil. Oil supply problems in these countries are likely to directly affect the US economy. Thus, the argument goes, the United States has an interest in continuing to secure transport routes from the Gulf to European and Asian markets. A failure to do so would allow the Chinese to quickly fill the void and perhaps one day deny the United States access (Snow 2016, p. 92). However, as with any policy, there are costs and benefits, and maybe the costs of keeping the Chinese at bay are simply too high. And perhaps, given a serious threat of US withdrawal from the region, Europeans or Asians could be convinced to take more responsibility over the security or transport routes. In sum, strategic concerns related to maintaining a stable oil supply make sense, but the shale revolution and growing energy independence of the United States should also call into question what have been regarded as rock-solid interests in the region and perhaps lead to a rethinking of US military obligations to Gulf states in particular. Moreover, as one analyst of Saudi Arabia has argued, it is in fact Riyadh's overdependence on oil revenues that gives the US leverage, since the Saudis will ultimately depend on American expertise and investment if they wish to diversify their economy (Wald 2018).

Counterterrorism is often another justification for ongoing military entanglements in the Arab world. US military facilities in both Qatar and Bahrain were used for operations in the recent war against the Islamic State. However, in an age when the main tools of counterterrorism are targeted strikes carried out by pilotless drones and covert operations conducted by small teams of special forces, it is more difficult to argue that a large troop presence is needed. The Obama administration preferred an

approach to counterterrorism that favored covert operations and air strikes. The Trump administration has not indicated that it intends to change course. The drone- and special forces–focused approach certainly has a range of drawbacks—starting with ethical ones—but those drawbacks pale in comparison to the costs of large conventional deployments. Moreover, experts note that the presence of US troops and bases in the Middle East has long provided ideological ammunition and recruitment fodder for terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda (Ashford 2018b).

The need to check Iran is a further reason given for US security partnerships with Gulf countries. Gulf officials never miss an opportunity to remind their American counterparts of the existential threat posed by Iran.[23] To some extent, the fear of Iran is legitimate, but Gulf Arab leaders have also blatantly exaggerated the threat to sway US policymakers. It is true that Iran seeks regional influence, and does so in ways that undermine the stability and sovereignty of its Arab neighbors. Among other policies, Iran has supported Hezbollah in Lebanon, Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, and violent Shia militias in Syria and Iraq. However, Iran does not seek to destroy Saudi Arabia or overthrow the Arab regional order. It has its own internal problems, and its revolutionary legitimacy is an anachronism in which few Iranians still believe (Peterson 2018). Iran's nuclear weapons program is a real security concern, but the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), or "Iran nuclear deal," promised to neutralize this threat—at least until the Trump administration decided to pull out of the agreement in May 2018. According to both international inspectors and US intelligence agencies, Iran had been complying with the JCPOA's requirements at the moment Trump announced that the United States was quitting the accord (International Atomic Energy Agency 2018). Moreover, the Iranian challenge cannot be treated entirely through the lens of security—it is also a political problem that calls for diplomacy, as the experience of negotiating the JCPOA showed.

Then there is the argument that security relationships with Arab states "buy" peace for Israel, in terms of threats from both its neighbors and Iran. Israel, of course, fears Iran just as much as it fears Arab states, and Iran has certainly given the Israelis reason to be afraid. But the idea that US security partnerships with Arab countries are needed to ensure that they do not turn against Israel is unsubstantiated. Nasr (2014) notes that Gulf leaders publicly pledge their support for the Palestinian struggle, but in private meetings with US officials only want to talk about the Iranian threat. As of 2019, Gulf monarchies and Sisi's Egypt seem to have found common cause with Israel, and cooperate with Israeli officials quite well behind the scenes (Fraihat 2019).

US security partnerships with autocratic Arab regimes do not foster pro-American attitudes. Instead, cooperation with nondemocratic regimes

fosters an anti-American outlook among a younger generation of Arabs. Moreover, they allow autocratic Arab regimes to build powerful domestic instruments of control and repression and advance corruption and cronyism. Consider Bahrain, one of the cases I examine in depth in this book and where the US Navy maintains a major facility. Washington's interests have been framed around ensuring a good relationship with the ruling monarchy, the al-Khalifa family. At the same time, al-Khalifa rule has been synonymous with corruption and nepotism, engendering widespread disaffection among the country's 70 percent Shia population. Thus, an alternate view of the US interest might be that the longer reforms are deferred, the harder it may be to ensure stability on the island and the safety of US basing and assets. Analysts have questioned the wisdom of propping up a minority Sunni monarchy that rules through repression rather than consent. Washington's "reluctance to condemn Bahrain," writes Jones (2011a), is the result of a deeply ingrained belief in Washington that the United States needs Bahrain to help it preserve regional stability and to protect friendly oil producers in the Persian Gulf. Jones (2011b) challenges these beliefs by offering a number of reasons why the "Fifth Fleet may well have become a political liability, irrelevant, or possibly even both." Jones argues that "the cost of maintaining a large military presence in the Gulf drains American resources and limits the United States' flexibility in dealing with regional crises" and "enables regional allies to act recklessly." Jones maintains that "Saudi Arabia would almost certainly not have sent its troops into neighboring Bahrain—a sovereign country—if the Saudi and Bahraini leaderships did not assume they were protected by their patrons in the U.S. military." Given the potentially explosive situation in Bahrain, Elliott Abrams (2015) asks "why it is smart to assume that the facilities the United States has in Bahrain will in fact be available—or safe to use—in the coming decades?" Noting growing Sunni extremism, Shia outrage, and deepening sectarian fragmentation in Bahrain and the wider region, Abrams wonders how the status quo can serve US interests. Abrams does not advocate doing away with the Fifth Fleet altogether, but he argues that its presence and the scope of US cooperation with the Bahraini military should be actively used by top US officials as a source of leverage over the Bahraini monarchy to encourage meaningful democratic reforms.

### *Challenging Security Partnerships from Libertarian and Realist Perspectives*

Criticism of the costs of US security partnerships in the Arab world, however, does not come only from proponents of democracy promotion. This criticism can also be found in libertarian-leaning Washington think tanks

such as the Cato Institute. For example, Cato's Emma Ashford (2018b, p. 128) writes that "it is unclear what goals this military presence is intended to achieve, other than to satisfy vague invocations of the need for 'engagement.'" Ashford observes that the current high force posture in the Middle East is a fairly recent phenomenon, which started only after the 1990–1991 Gulf War when increased numbers of troops in the region were justified by the need to contain both Iraq and Iran. President Bill Clinton's decision to keep sizable numbers of US troops in the region may also have had to do with domestic political benefits. If nothing else, it provided the "U.S. military a needed and not-too-costly new mission" in the aftermath of the Cold War (Ashford 2018b, p. 131). This policy of dual containment and the departure from "offshore balancing" in Ashford's view "was at best weakly justified" given that Iraq's armed forces had been crushed and Iran was still suffering from its war with Iraq. Moreover, in the preceding decades the United States had held the Soviet Union at bay and effectively managed both Iran and Iraq "through adroit balancing of aid and a swift military response to Iraqi aggression" without the large military presence (Ashford 2018b, p. 130).

From the realist perspective, Michael Wahid Hanna (2015) has challenged the idea that a continuing US security partnership with Egypt, which entails annual assistance on the order of $1.3 billion, falls within the US national interest. As noted earlier, despite its decades-long investment in Egypt, the United States has not achieved a professional military, a reduction in terrorism, or a stable democracy that respects human rights. Instead, successive Egyptian governments have propagated anti-Americanism in state-controlled media and attacked US-funded NGOs. Hanna notes that Egypt is no longer the Arab power that it used to be, and the benefits the United States supposedly derives from its relationship with Cairo are overrated. He describes the US-Egyptian relationship as "nakedly transactional," and one that "benefits the Egyptians more than the Americans." Like Ashford, Hanna is not an advocate of democracy promotion. But he nevertheless sees ongoing repression in Egypt as a long-term liability for the United States. He argues that the Obama administration's 2015 resumption of aid "implicated the United States in Egypt's repression of Islamists, secular activists, and journalists who have dared to challenge or even merely criticize Sisi." He concedes that at times the United States is forced to make deals with dictators but argues that "for such compromises to be worth it, the strategic benefits must outweigh the costs." Hanna concludes that the United States should distill its relationship with Egypt to core interests, such as overflight rights, some basic counterterrorism cooperation, and access to the Suez Canal. Egypt, Hanna maintains, is likely to cooperate in all of these areas because it is in its interest to do so.

### *Discussion*

What the Washington foreign policy establishment defines as core US interests in the region are in part shaped by inertia and reinforced by longstanding security partnerships from which the United States finds it hard to extract itself. The "engagement" argument so frequently used by US military agencies to justify a continued presence in the Gulf conflates military presence with diplomatic influence (Ashford 2018b, p. 135). In reality, however, the two are actually in competition with each other when it comes not only to democratic leverage, but leverage over a whole host of other US priorities. Security partnerships with Gulf countries, in fact, have made it much harder for the United States to rein in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE as counterdemocratic spoilers or "challengers" (described in Chapter 5). In reality, as Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes (2019) write, these bases have "strategic implications" because of the "moral hazard" they create: "They encourage the region's leaders to act in ways they otherwise might not, safe in the knowledge that the United States is invested in the stability of their regimes."

Arguments about the perverse effects of the status quo come not only from democracy and human rights "types" but also from realists and libertarians who challenge whether the costs the United States pays for its alliances with Arab autocrats truly serve its interests. To understand how these "interests" are formulated and translated into policy, we must turn to the "agents" of national interest. In what follows, I highlight three additional determinants of democracy promotion policies—*individuals, institutions,* and *challengers*—each of which is elaborated in the subsequent sections.

## Individuals and US Democracy Promotion

Consider the following scenario: Two senior foreign policy officials occupy the same position at different times. Each brings to the job a distinct set of psychological "baggage." The first believes that US interests in Arab states are best served by maintaining ongoing relationships with ruling regimes. This official also retains a deep aversion to political Islam. The second official is not immune to skepticism about democracy in the Arab world but is also willing to rethink US ties to Arab autocrats in light of pent-up economic and political frustrations among ordinary Arabs. This second official may also have doubts about political Islam but is willing to give Islamist parties a chance to prove that they are capable of adhering to democratic credentials. Each official presides over a critical moment for US democracy promotion in the same Arab country.

Though simplified a bit here, the scenario above describes two real US officials and the circumstances they faced: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton when the Egyptian uprising broke out in January 2011, and her successor, John Kerry, when a military coup threatened to bring down a democratically elected Islamist president in Egypt in June 2013. Each perceived the unfolding events through a unique filter. In 2011, Clinton perceived an opportunity for the United States to encourage the development of a pluralistic political order that was inclusive of Islamists, perhaps owing to her instinctive sense, as expressed in the 2011 Doha speech, that the status quo was unsustainable. She was less willing to accept the Arab autocratic narrative that free elections would inevitably lead to Islamist theocracy and the growth of terrorism, and in some ways was ahead of the risk-averse State Department she led in responding to the Arab Spring. Kerry, on the other hand, appeared to harbor a deep aversion to the Muslim Brotherhood and perhaps a belief that democracy was simply not possible in Egypt (Kirkpatrick 2018, p. 116). He also brought to the job relationships of many years with ruling Arab regimes, especially those in the Gulf. This and his singular focus on Israeli-Palestinian peace drew him away from democracy promotion in Egypt. No wonder then, that Kerry's "soft" positions on the 2013 Egyptian coup were out of sync with President Obama, who wanted the Egyptian military to pay some price for the coup and the brutal crackdown on Muslim Brotherhood supporters that followed. Differences in the worldview of individual policymakers, then, had direct consequences for US democracy promotion policies in Egypt.

The role of the individual—the experiences, personality, beliefs, and preferences that the president, his or her key advisers, and other foreign policy elites bring to the table—is understudied in international relations and foreign policy analysis. Although an actor-centric model is often helpful in explaining foreign policy outcomes, it is hard to research and theorize (Marsden 2005, p. 7). The beliefs that animate how individuals perceive foreign policy issues are based on a unique background and set of experiences. That is, they perceive the world subjectively, through a very personal set of psychological lenses. While institutions can powerfully shape individuals (Chapter 4), the opposite is also true: Individuals can shape both the character, priorities, and influence of the institutions they lead.

Any analysis focusing on the role of the individual in foreign policy making must start with the person of the president. The president is the head of state—and thus America's most recognizable symbol around the world—as well as the principal decisionmaker on foreign policy matters. The president also exerts influence on foreign policy by setting priorities, appointing senior officials, and acting as the chief executive of a vast foreign policy bureaucracy. The president acts, like all human beings, according to a personality, belief system, and leadership style. However, other

individuals also influence foreign policy outcomes, especially those with direct access to the president. Among them are the president's top foreign policy advisers. Some of these advisers have access to the president by virtue of status and position: the chief of staff and the national security adviser, for example. Certain cabinet officials (secretary of state, secretary of defense) are involved in foreign policy decisions by law and custom. Other individuals the president regularly consults, depending on the issue, might include: the secretary of the treasury, the chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the director of national intelligence, and the US permanent representative to the United Nations (UN). Yet, there are also those whose influence derives not from their title or position in the hierarchy but from their privileged relationship with the president. Such individuals could include members of the National Security Council or White House staff, members of Congress, politically appointed ambassadors, or even those outside of government (think-tank scholars, businesspeople, interest group representatives) who can reach the president directly.

The focus on the individual in the study of foreign policy decisionmaking is a perspective derived from psychology and cognitive science. *Homo psychologicus* is an umbrella term for a set of theories developed in the 1960s and 1970s about how individual decisionmakers process information (Houghton 2013, p. 18). Applied to foreign policy analysis, all of these theories begin with the observations that (1) individuals make key foreign policy decisions and (2) individuals make decisions with imperfect information and other cognitive limitations and thus rely on factors such as historical analogy, information shortcuts, scripts, and emotions. Individuals, then, are "boundedly rational" actors (Simon 1957, 1983) who frequently "cling to their existing beliefs and preconceptions, often rationalizing away the new information as insignificant or explaining it away so as to preserve their existing attitudes and mindsets" (Houghton 2013, p. 14) even when confronted with contradictory evidence and information.

One strand of theory drawing on the individual approach focuses on the "irresistible pull" of analogical reasoning (Houghton 2013, p. 68). Reasoning with the help of analogies is especially relevant in conditions of uncertainty and information overload around fast-moving events, when policymakers are most likely to resort to cognitive shortcuts such as analogies. Analogies, however, can mislead as well as illuminate because our minds "often downplay the differences between situations" (Houghton 2013, p. 69). Individuals, in other words, may assume parallels between a set of events and miss critical dissimilarities.

Robert Abelson (1981) highlights *cognitive scripts*—conceptual representations of stereotyped event sequences—as a way to understand the role of the individual in foreign policy making. He describes such scripts as "a particular kind of schema or mental box, which provides the typical default

values for an event of some kind or an act which we are accustomed to performing."[24] In other words, individual decisionmakers fit new data into established mental categories based on experience, both "because it requires little effort and because it allows us to make sense of the outside world quickly and expeditiously."[25] This is particularly true in "conditions of high uncertainty and ambiguity, where the individual is being bombarded with too much information, or where he or she possesses too little of this." But just because something is "typically true" does not mean it will be true when a novel situation emerges, and these shortcuts can lead to oversimplification (Houghton 2013, p. 79).[26] In US foreign policy debates, the "Munich script" cautions about the dangers of appeasing a dictator, while the "Vietnam script" stresses the dangers of confrontation over accommodation. The former script can lead decisionmakers to overreact, while the latter can lead to overcautiousness.[27]

## Institutions and US Democracy Promotion

Consider now this scenario: Protests challenging authoritarianism break out in an Arab country, and the regime responds with a violent crackdown, killing many unarmed, innocent protesters. This Arab state happens to be a close US ally and hosts a large US military installation. The fact that the state is a close ally does not stop the US government from being repulsed at the regime's brutal treatment of peaceful protesters, and both the White House and State Department issue statements condemning the violence and urging the offending Arab regime to enter into a dialogue with the opposition. A senior State Department official is dispatched to meet with regime leaders and communicates Washington's displeasure with the lethal violence inflicted upon unarmed protesters and implies unspecified damage to the bilateral relationship should the regime continue down the road of repression. Just a few days later, the head of US Central Command, the primary Department of Defense entity responsible for the Middle East, visits the country and meets with regime leaders as well. This official's talking points include a line taken from the State Department's script about refraining from violence and engaging with the opposition, but it is preceded by a number of other talking points emphasizing the importance of the military relationship, thanking the regime for its assistance on counterterrorism, praising the completion of recent joint exercises, and expressing concern about the safety and security of US personnel in the country given the recent unrest. Meanwhile, back in Washington, at interagency policy meetings on the country, Pentagon representatives remind participants of the vital strategic importance and irreplaceability of the base and the US relationship with the regime. Diplomats and lobbyists advocate for the regime, engaging with the Pentagon and

congressional representatives. Meanwhile, the US ambassador meets with the regime and delivers a more conciliatory message.

This scenario is a composite of the dynamics that have often characterized US policy in Bahrain. While any constituent part of the US government would prefer a democratic Bahrain, the Pentagon has more immediate and narrow interests vis-à-vis the tiny Gulf state, resulting in multiple messages and policies on democracy promotion. As one retired US ambassador who worked closely with the military put it to me, the Department of Defense may think that it would be *good* to have democracy in an autocratic country where it operates, but it *must* have stability.[28]

In Bahrain, the Pentagon's interest lies first and foremost in protecting its strategically important base and preserving the security relationship. The US ambassador and the State Department's Near Eastern Affairs Bureau understand the destabilizing effect of Shia marginalization in Bahrain but are also interested in maintaining access and ties and not offending the royal family. Thus, a sub-bureaucratic entity, the State Department Bureau of Democracy, Rights, and Labor (DRL), is often the lone actor pushing for democratic promotion in Bahrain in a consistent and meaningful manner. As for the Bahraini royals, they readily recognize the internal US government divisions and see them as an opportunity to insert themselves into US interagency disputes, playing one institution off another.

Accounts of US foreign policy based on the institutional approach do not lend themselves to the elegant models associated with international relations theory. Bureaucratic politics are hard to discern since foreign policy debates generally happen behind closed doors and thus are often opaque to researchers, not to mention the general public. Yet, anyone who has worked within the Washington apparatus knows that foreign policy is often the outcome of a messy process of daily wrangling among various bureaucratic actors who look after particularistic, *institutional interests*. As James March and Herbert Simon (1958) have pointed out, the activities of a particular organization are concrete, while the generalized interest of the government is not. Thus, individuals come to see organizations as the way to operationalize the national interest. Bureaucrats come to identify strongly with their organizations and develop an awareness of the shortcomings of rival ones. For career officials, a strong identification with a particular institution and a personal interest in promotion often shapes the idea that their organization is vital to the national interest and leads them to defend it vigorously in interagency debates (Halperin and Clapp 2006). If a bureaucratic actor happens to be dominant on a specific issue, foreign policy outcomes may come to reflect that institutional actor's interests. Furthermore, as noted above for the case of US policy toward Bahrain, individual bureaucracies have subunits, each with their own functions, interests, and views.

Derived from organizational theory, the bureaucratic politics approach to US foreign policy decisionmaking was developed in the 1960s and 1970s by scholars such as Graham Allison (1971), but its insights remain strikingly relevant for understanding US foreign policy decisionmaking today. This literature's key assumptions are that (1) the United States is not always a unitary actor; (2) the instinct of any organization is self-preservation; (3) US foreign policy does not result from the intentions of any one individual; (4) US foreign policy is not based on a rational calculation based on interests, costs, and benefits; and (5) foreign policy bureaucracies may resist the preferences of presidents and other political leaders.

Seen from the bureaucratic perspective, foreign policy outcomes are less a reflection of deliberate choices than the result of bargaining between large agencies with very different ideas about how policies should be framed and pursued, and different tools with which to pursue them. Foreign policy decisions, thus, can end up as the least common denominator—one that everyone can agree on but fully pleases no one—or a collage of policies containing something for everyone (Houghton 2013, p. 9). In the face of bureaucratic wrangling, the president might end up as little more than a passive bystander or referee (Houghton 2013, p. 9).[29] The principal foreign policy bureaucratic actors, and their respective views on democracy promotion, are presented in an appendix at the end of the book.

The policy positions of institutional actors in the US foreign policy community also reflect unique organizational cultures. James Q. Wilson (1991, pp. 91–110) defines organizational culture as "a persistent, patterned way of thinking, which passes from one generation to the next." Edgar Schein (1984, p. 3) notes that organizational cultures inform basic underlying assumptions and encourage a "set of shared meanings" that influence the way in which individuals interpret and act upon their environment. Unique organizational cultures shape an institution's core goals, methods, and strategy, as well as the frames through which each institution sees foreign policy issues. At times, this results in the lack of shared definition among bureaucratic actors of what policy goals such as democracy promotion mean. The socialization of new employees into bureaucracies helps to perpetuate organizational cultures across generations and turn institutions into "mini societies" with processes, norms, and structures calibrated to uphold certain values (Allaire and Firsirotu 1984). However, as noted earlier, institutions are not unitary actors, and varying organizational cultures may exist at the subinstitutional level or in field offices versus Washington headquarters.

Institutions tend toward inertia; they move only when pushed hard and persistently (Halperin and Clapp 2006, p. 99). Bureaucrats prefer the status quo, and at any time only a small group among them is advocating serious changes in policy. Changes in administration and party have little effect on

many foreign policy operations, and bureaucrats see elected officials as a temporary phenomenon that they can "wait out."[30] Moreover, the time and resources of any one person in the bureaucracy are limited, and he or she must pick battles over policy changes carefully (Halperin and Clapp 2006, p. 99). Arduous clearance processes, a focus on yearly performance evaluations, and a strict vertical hierarchy discourage the advocacy of meaningful change and tend to push bureaucrats toward "least common denominator" proposals. Democracy promotion is rarely part of such proposals as it tends to be disruptive to relations in a way that makes institutions nervous.

Bureaucratic actors have another advantage over the White House: the specialized knowledge and well-developed repertoires on which presidents rely to formulate and implement foreign policy. Because presidents have limited time and capacity to absorb all the complexities of a given issue, bureaucracies possess an information advantage that helps them frame an issue in a way that reflects their interests. At the implementation stage, there is a significant principal-agent problem that gives bureaucracies the room to shape, resist, distort, or even undermine a president's agenda. Thus, the bureaucratic politics model can help explain the gap between the intention of a policy as formulated by the president and the manner in which that policy is actually implemented.

## Challengers to US Democracy Promotion

Consider this final scenario: After the Arab uprisings, wealthy but vulnerable Arab monarchies in the Gulf region are terrified of "people power" uprisings and their capacity to topple regimes. They are stunned that the US policy response to the uprisings has included, in some cases, withdrawal of support for allied autocrats.

They are even more concerned that ideological rivals such as the Muslim Brotherhood are ascendant in post–Arab Spring elections. In one case in particular, a member of the Brotherhood has been elected president in a reasonably free and fair election. The Gulf monarchies pull out all the stops to both discredit the Brotherhood president and influence US policy to turn against him. They start a media campaign demonizing the elected president, funnel millions of dollars to groups seeking to topple him, and after a military coup is successfully executed, pledge tens of billions of dollars to support the coup plotters, eclipsing whatever aid the United States threatens to cut. Meanwhile, lobbyists and diplomats acting on behalf of the Gulf countries mobilize to convince Washington executive and legislative branch officials that Muslim Brothers are closet terrorists whom the United States should actively oppose, while disparaging US officials who engage with Islamist political groups.

The scenario above describes Saudi and Emirati actions in 2013 around the Egyptian military coup, an event they backed in numerous ways while lobbying for US support. It reminds us that US policies in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings did not work in "splendid isolation" (Marsden 2005, p. 7). As Derek Chollet, a former senior Obama administration official said, the United States "was not the only player, and it was by far not the most active player in terms of resources."[31] During and after the Arab Spring, a number of external actors used their diplomatic, economic, and military muscle to interfere directly in the politics of Arab Spring states. The Arab Spring shook the wealthiest and most powerful Gulf monarchies to their core, not only because they despised ascendant actors such as the Muslim Brotherhood, but because they feared democracy itself. The tiny state of Qatar seemingly embraced the protesters in 2011, but it did so mostly in a gamble that its own ideological allies would prevail in transitions, and because the small kingdom's sheer wealth and small population made the possibility of rebellion within its borders unlikely (Walsh 2018). However, Qatar also played a democracy-undermining role at key post–Arab Spring junctures through its support for proxy militias and other actors with an undemocratic agenda.

The role of challenger is not a new one. The United States played it during the Cold War, propping up repressive right-wing governments as a way to contain Soviet expansion. States such as Russia, China, and France have all played it during the post–Cold War period, using economic, diplomatic, and other assistance to shore up autocratic governments in neighboring or former colonial states. Russia has backed authoritarian and corrupt governments in Armenia, Belarus, and Ukraine and blocked these states from closer association with the European Union. France has supported autocrats in former colonies such as Cameroon and Gabon. China has provided aid and investment with "no strings attached" to autocratic African states.

While individuals and institutions are variables endogenous to the US foreign-policy-making process, challengers are not exclusively exogenous to it. This is because the challengers of interest here—Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates in particular—are also close US allies with long-standing and deep networks of influence in Washington. As described earlier, the Washington consensus regards them as indispensable allies owing to hydrocarbon resources, security partnerships, and their role in balancing the Iranian threat. Consequently, challengers could be effective counterweights to US democracy promotion not only because they used their diplomatic, economic, and military muscle to interfere directly in the politics of Arab Spring states, but also because they harnessed their Washington linkages to influence or reinforce the beliefs of key US policymakers.

While the literature on democracy promotion and democratic diffusion is substantial, scholarship on exporting authoritarianism remains limited.

Scholars have highlighted the tools authoritarian powers use to support fellow autocrats, tools that mirror those used by democracy promoters. Authoritarian states, for example, can "bid" for loyalty by offering autocratic actors assistance that exceeds whatever democracy promoters threaten to take away as punishment for democratic transgressions. They can use diplomacy in multilateral organizations such as the UN Security Council to prop up allied autocrats. Or they can deploy their militaries to quell challenges to authoritarian rule. Investigating Russia's involvement in Belarus, Venezuela's engagement in Peru and Nicaragua, and Iran's connections to Lebanon, Rachel Vanderhill (2013) examines how states promote authoritarianism. She argues that authoritarian actors use both incentives (trade agreements, cheap supplies of energy, additional financial resources) and negative inducements (denial of energy supplies) to influence the calculations of local elites (Vanderhill 2013, p. 8).

While the tools authoritarian powers use to exert their influence are clear, there is less agreement about the motivations of autocracy-promoting states. For instance, one strand in the literature sees authoritarian powers as primarily interested in regional stability, and not necessarily reproducing their form of rule. Julia Bader, Jörn Grävingholt, and Antje Kästner (2010, pp. 88–91) find that powers such as Russia and China will prefer authoritarian rule abroad if a targeted country is already in some state of disarray. Moreover, "autocracy promotion" may be more about protecting or expanding regional spheres of influence than exporting a particular model of rule. Natalie Shapovalova and Kateryna Zarembo (2010), writing about Russia, claim that Moscow does not see the preservation of authoritarian rule as an end in itself, but rather as a way to maintain its privileged sphere of influence in the "near abroad." The 2018 Russian recognition of a reform-oriented leader in Armenia who came to power following mass protests lends some credibility to the idea that Russia is more interested in maintaining influence than fostering copycat autocratic regimes.

Similarly, Daniel Odinius and Philipp Kuntz (2015, p. 644) argue that states such as Saudi Arabia promote autocratic actors in the interest of self-preservation rather than for ideological reasons or access to resources. GCC countries, they write, "were mostly afraid of uprisings in states with monarchical rule and with similar domestic groups." This may also explain why the Saudis were more active autocracy promoters after the Arab Spring than the Qataris, since the former had greater fears of competing ideologies than the latter given Saudi Arabia's greater reliance on religious credentials for legitimacy. But if realpolitik considerations serve as the best explanation for the GCC's autocracy-promoting policies in Arab Spring countries, it is still necessary to explain why GCC countries chose not to support autocratic regimes in Syria, Yemen, and Libya in the name of stability. Here Odinius and Kuntz (2015) suggest yet another explanation, which are the

"reputational gains" GCC monarchies might achieve domestically by standing up to atrocities committed by Qaddafi and Assad in particular. Opposing autocratic strongmen such as Qaddafi, Saleh, and Assad also offered the Gulf regimes "a way of diverting international attention from political oppression in the Gulf and gaining Western acquiescence over the GCC's own intervention in Bahrain" (Odinius and Kuntz 2015).

Then there is the question of whether efforts to promote autocracy actually work. Vanderhill (2013) aims to understand the impact of challengers on regime type, which she argues rests in part on the internal dynamics of target states. If certain political actors or segments of the population in target states have ties to an autocracy promoter in ethnic or ideological terms, it gives the autocracy promoter increased leverage. Shia in Lebanon (with ties to Iran) and ethnic Russians throughout the former Soviet space are a case in point. Vanderhill focuses on the balance of power among elites in a target state and the nature of linkages between the recipient state and autocracy promoter. She theorizes that if the target country is evenly divided between liberal and illiberal elites and there are economic, historical, or ideological linkages between the target state and autocracy promoter, then the promotion of autocracy is likely to be more effective (Vanderhill 2013, p. 8). Autocracy promotion, in other words, works in synergy with domestic factors.

The power of an autocracy promoter to challenge Western prodemocratic leverage also depends on the will and capacity of potential democracy-promoting states to stand up to the challengers. Gulf states can succeed as autocracy promoters in part because there is a transatlantic preference for stability and security in the Arab world over democracy and human rights. Moreover, Saudi Arabia is deemed strategically important for the West as an oil exporter and regional power (Hassan 2015).

## Cases and Methods

The empirical material in the book focuses on three countries in which I argue that the United States had potential democratic leverage: two longstanding autocratic Arab allies of the United States—Egypt and Bahrain—and a state with which the United States had a much more complicated relationship prior to the Arab Spring—Libya. In 2011, all three countries experienced mass uprisings fueled by a desire for political reform and economic justice. In Egypt, the uprising toppled a strongman, Hosni Mubarak, and his hegemonic political party, if not the military system that guaranteed Mubarak's rule. In Bahrain, protests did not bring down the monarchy but shook it to its core and provoked a violent crackdown by both Bahraini authorities and intervening GCC troops. In Libya, protests turned into an armed rebellion that, with the

help of external military intervention, succeeded in overthrowing the personalized dictatorship of Muammar Qaddafi. In all three cases, then, there was a significant political opening for democracy promotion.

In all three cases, moreover, there was evidence that the status quo was incompatible with long-term stability, suggesting a need to recalibrate how US interests were perceived. In Bahrain, a minority Sunni monarchy had failed to extend adequate political and economic rights to the country's Shia majority, and unrest was a regular occurrence. In Egypt, crony capitalism, corruption, massive inequalities, and continuing repression had led to widespread dissatisfaction. The existence of an anti-American and anti-Israeli state media had already led to questions in some parts of the US government as to what benefits the United States was deriving from its support of the authoritarian status quo.[32] In Libya, there was also extensive corruption and a dearth of economic opportunities for a bulging youth population. This was accompanied by high levels of repression that left almost no room for freedom of expression or civil society.

Promoting democracy in Bahrain and Egypt promised special benefits. Close US relations with both countries, manifested in military-to-military ties and extensive security assistance programs, suggested a high degree of US leverage. By promoting democracy, the United States could counter accusations that it is not interested in democracy where friendly regimes are concerned. Moreover, both countries had a history of political and economic reforms that could serve as a foundation for democracy promotion. Egypt in the latter years of Mubarak had become a "liberalizing autocracy,"[33] while in Bahrain there was a well-organized opposition, and the country had taken steps toward constitutional monarchy. In both Egypt and Bahrain, there were civil society groups and media outlets critical of the government. Both countries had parliaments and judiciaries that exhibited streaks of independence. By comparison, such a foundation for democratization did not exist in US allies such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, or Qatar, and existed to a more limited extent in allies such as Morocco and Jordan.

Libya, by contrast, was not an autocratic ally of the United States prior to 2011, and as such is a case that allows one to test the role of individuals and institutions in a context not characterized by decades of close military-to-military relations. Here, the story of potential US democratic leverage is more nuanced. During the 2011 Arab Spring, the lack of sufficient strategic and bureaucratic interest in maintaining the status quo in Libya meant that institutions such as the Department of Defense, while opposing the intervention, did not constitute as much of an obstacle to robust forms of democracy promotion as they did in Egypt and Bahrain. While US leverage over the Qaddafi regime was limited at the time of the 2011 uprising owing to a lack of close ties such as those that connected the United States to

Egypt and Bahrain, it was heightened during the post-Qaddafi transition owing to US support of the rebel government.

The choice of cases allows me to test the central premise of the book: that the notion of a clear and unified national interest that can explain why the United States tends not to pursue democracy promotion in the Arab world is elusive. The constellation of US interests in Libya, Egypt, and Bahrain did not necessarily predict the initially bold democracy promotion moves the Obama administration made in all three cases in 2011. In Egypt, despite extremely close US relations with Hosni Mubarak for nearly three decades, Obama ultimately made the decision to call for him to step down. In Bahrain, despite a close relationship with the ruling family, the presence of a major naval base, and pressure from ally Saudi Arabia, Obama criticized the monarchy for its violent crackdown and instituted a "pause" on weapons sales. In Libya, despite a *lack* of sufficient strategic interests, Obama made the risky decision to join a military intervention that helped topple the Qaddafi regime.

All three cases—Egypt, Bahrain, and Libya—allow one to observe the role of challengers, or third-party spoilers of democratization. Emboldened by Obama's perceived withdrawal from the Middle East and alarmed by his readiness to reconsider long-standing alliances and engage Iran, Gulf Arab states launched their own campaigns of counterleverage in the region, simultaneously limiting the influence of US democratic pressure and convincing Washington policymakers that their efforts would make little difference in the face of overwhelming Gulf money and influence. In Libya, Egypt, and Bahrain, we witness three different ways Gulf Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates have countered US democracy promotion: financial guarantees to authoritarian forces, the cultivation of proxy militias, and direct military intervention.

For each case, I focus on a number of critical events in post–Arab Spring transitions and analyze how the United States responded to them—violent crackdowns, constitutional and legislative crises, elections, and other important developments. For example, in Egypt, I look at the 2011–2012 protests against the military council that governed the country after the ouster of Mubarak, the 2011–2012 parliamentary elections, the 2012 presidential elections, the 2013 coup, and the growing atmosphere of repression after 2015. In Bahrain, such critical moments included the violent crackdown on Pearl Roundabout in March 2011, the release of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) report in November 2011, and the events surrounding the run-up to the November 2014 election. In Libya, critical events include the 2012 decision by interim governing authorities to deputize militias as providers of security, the 2012 elections to an interim parliament, the 2013 Political Isolation Law, and the fragmentation of the country into competing power centers in the summer of 2014.

Alongside the comparative case study approach, I utilize methods such as process tracing of foreign policy decisionmaking and counterfactual reasoning. My data comes from multiple sources. I garnered firsthand knowledge of the events and policies covered in the book as a US diplomat posted in Egypt and Libya immediately after the Arab Spring. Thus, my understanding of both US policies and conditions in those two countries stems in part from those experiences. After leaving government, I made fieldwork visits to a number of Arab Spring countries and talked to former and current government officials, analysts, and, when it was possible and safe for my interview subjects, to democracy activists, with the goal of understanding how local actors perceive US democratic leverage. In 2017 and 2018, I conducted over fifty interviews with key decisionmakers in the Obama administration. Given that they were now out of government, many of these former officials could be more open about the deliberations within the administration, but many still requested to be interviewed on background or off the record.

In choosing US officials to interview, I was careful to elicit perspectives from across the interagency: State Department, Department of Defense, National Security Council, and other institutions. I also interviewed senior diplomats who were in the region during the period analyzed. When inquiring about the debates that went into key policy decisions, I made sure to ask different officials the same question so as to corroborate facts and better understand different institutional and individual perspectives. Outside of government, I spoke to experts at Washington, DC–based think tanks and other analysts with knowledge of the countries I cover and of the US foreign-policy-making process. Finally, I relied on multiple primary sources: memoirs, statements, speeches, assistance data, human rights reports, published interviews, and other government documents that detail US policies toward the Arab world after 2011.

## Organization of the Book

Chapter 2 outlines what democracy promotion is (and isn't), presents its tools, and discusses how one can identify a high versus low degree of democracy promotion. It also contains a brief history of US democracy promotion in the Arab world, focusing on the limited efforts of the George W. Bush administration to promote democracy in the region. In the ensuing three empirical chapters I show how individuals, institutions, and challengers shaped Obama's approach to democracy promotion during and after the Arab Spring. Chapter 3 focuses on individuals; Chapter 4 is about institutions; and Chapter 5 covers challengers, the third-party spoilers of US democracy promotion. Chapter 6 summarizes US policy

under Obama and analyzes US democracy promotion in the Arab world and beyond during the first two years of the Trump presidency. An appendix provides an overview of US foreign policy institutions and how they relate to democracy promotion.

## Notes

All interviews cited were conducted by the author unless otherwise noted.

1. The change in approach was reflected in Obama's public oratory: compare, for example, his May 2011 speech on the Arab Spring (Obama 2011b) with his September 2013 speech before the UN General Assembly (Obama 2013).

2. Notable books on US democracy promotion include Smith (2012); Carothers (2004); Cox, Ikenberry, and Inoguchi (2000); and McFaul (2010).

3. For example, Smith's (2012) seminal work on the history of US democracy promotion very rarely mentions the Arab world.

4. An example is Nau's (2013) essay on Reagan's democracy promotion policies. Some authors highlight the democracy promotion efforts of certain US presidential administrations while barely mentioning that those same presidents were content with propping up the authoritarian status quo in the Arab world.

5. Examples include Marsden (2005) and Huber (2015).

6. For example, Linz and Stepan (1996).

7. For example, Whitehead (2001); Levitsky and Way (2010); and Gleditsch and Ward (2006).

8. For example, Vanderhill (2013).

9. Scholarly books on the Arab Spring are too numerous to list here, but examples include Lynch (2014); Diamond and Plattner (2014); and Lynch (2016). Trade book examples include Worth (2016) and Kirkpatrick (2018).

10. There seems to be more scholarly work on EU democracy promotion before and after the Arab Spring, including Van Hüllen (2015) and Balfour (2012). There are some more recent works on the United States and the Arab Spring. Abrams (2017) covers the US response to the Arab Spring from a democracy promotion advocacy vantage point, while Wahlrab and McNeal (2018) edited a volume that employs critical theory to illuminate Washington's policy responses to the Arab uprisings.

11. Interview with Elliott Abrams, Washington, DC, February 2018.

12. See United Nations Development Programme (2002).

13. Rice, quoted in Traub (2008, p. 3).

14. Clinton, quoted in Landler (2011).

15. The realist approach also assumes perfect information and a rational and orderly approach on the part of policymakers who consider all available options and calculate their relative costs and benefits (Houghton 2013, p. 7). There are those realists who see the United States as a liberal power and thus its interests as moral. But, as Kaplan (2013) notes, these interests are only "secondarily moral." This is because adjusting the balance of power in one's favor has been throughout history an amoral enterprise pursued by both liberal and illiberal powers (Kaplan 2013). Moreover, even if the United States pursues balancing in the service of a noble goal, such as preventing war among states, it is not necessarily promoting democracy.

16. Egypt's peace agreement with Israel, for example, rested "on a narrow pedestal of just a few leaders—like Mubarak" (Morrell 2016, p. 181), but was and

remains deeply unpopular among the Egyptian public. This is hardly the recipe for a stable alliance.

17. In the wake of the killing of Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018, influential voices in Congress began to question the relationship in more poignant terms.

18. Phone interview with former US official, November 2017.

19. In December 2018, President Trump announced a pullout of US troops from Syria.

20. Phone interview with former US official, May 2018.

21. Quoted in Halperin and Clapp (2006, p. 280).

22. The UAE, for example, was the first Gulf country to purchase the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system from the United States, in 2012 (Defense Security Cooperation Agency 2012).

23. Phone interview with US official, May 2018.

24. Quoted in Houghton (2013, p. 75).

25. Ibid.

26. Realists argue that the individual level of analysis is irrelevant when seen from the perspective of global power politics. Rational-choice theorists and those who employ formal modeling do not dispute the central relevance of human beings in foreign policy decisionmaking, but they see them simply as utility-maximizing rational actors rather than complex individuals animated by their past experiences, beliefs, emotions, and analogical reasoning.

27. Role theory, first articulated by K.J. Holsti (1970), also incorporates the influence of individual agency into foreign policy analysis. Holsti argued that decision-makers' conceptions of their state's role in international politics influence that state's foreign policy behavior. Role theory was subsequently further developed and connected with psychological approaches to foreign policy analysis.

28. Interview with Ambassador Cameron Munter, Aix-en-Provence, March 2018.

29. The bureaucratic politics approach was further elaborated in another seminal contribution, Morton Halperin's (1974) exhaustive *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy,* an updated edition of which appeared as Halperin and Clapp (2006).

30. When asked about the impact of the transition from Lyndon Johnson to Richard Nixon, outgoing secretary of state Dean Rusk suggested the importance of continuity and consistency in government behavior: "A transition is not so earth-shaking. Of the thousand or so cables that go out of here every day, I see only five or six and the President only one or two. Those who send out the other 994 cables will still be here. It is a little bit like changing engineers on a train going steadily down the track. The new engineer has some switches he can make choices about—but 4,500 intergovernmental agreements don't change." Rusk, quoted in Halperin and Clapp (2006, p. 308).

31. Interview with Derek Chollet, Washington, DC, November 2018.

32. Interview with former US official, Washington, DC, February 2018.

33. On liberalizing autocracies, see Brumberg (2002).