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U.S. Democracy Promotion from Bush to Obama

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the twenty-first century the United States (U.S.) has attempted to balance its traditional national security interests, whilst also seeking to promote the long-term transformation of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) towards democracy based on liberal values. With the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks providing a catalyst for policy change, the U.S. has moved away from its twentieth-century policy of pursuing a regional status quo and instinctively balking at political change. Yet, the U.S. has not abandoned its reliance on autocratic regimes that cooperate on more immediate national security interests such as counter-terrorism, counter-proliferation, and the free-flow energy sources into the global market. Rather, U.S. democracy promotion in the MENA has become incremental by design and is characterized by its gradualist and often-collaborative nature. U.S. foreign policy in the MENA is, therefore, depicted by a cautious evolutionary stance rather than supporting revolutionary shifts in power.

Whilst the 2003 invasion of Iraq has tarnished public perceptions of “democracy promotion” and the legitimacy of the U.S. projecting its values beyond its shores, there is more substance to democracy promotion than “regime change” and the soaring rhetoric of the G.W. Bush administration’s Freedom Agenda. As a matter of fact, the G.W. Bush administration also laid foundations for what the Obama administration has come to call “the long game”, which emphasizes “partnerships” and “sustainability” in its efforts to create the long-term conditions for freedom, peace and prosperity. Indeed, this is very much a rationale that informs what President Obama summarized as a doctrine of ‘strategic patience and persistence’ in the 2015 U.S. National Security Strategy (Obama, 2015, Foreword). In terms of democracy promotion in the MENA, such a strategy draws on preexisting institutional structures and capabilities, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and the International Republican Institute (IRI), along with a global network of democracy promotion leaders, NGOs and activists. Yet, the strategy has also built on specific policy instruments that were institutionalized throughout the 2000s, namely the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), the Broader Middle East and North Africa Agreement (BMENA), and the Middle East Free Trade Agreement (MEFTA). The Obama administration has quietly allowed these institutions to develop, evolve and mature, allowing them to extend where possible, but tempering them when deemed necessary, MEPI providing a most recent and perhaps particularly emblematic examples. The original intellectual rationale set out by the Bush administration has met the realities of President Obama’s strategic pragmatism.

The quest for a pragmatic approach reflects the Obama administration’s attempt to overcome the U.S.’s damaged reputation and distancing itself from its predecessor. Yet, pragmatism has not provided the basis for the development of a coherent narrative on democracy promotion in the MENA, nor has it ensured that opportunities would be always seized as they came up. In fact, President Obama may well have designated the invasion of Iraq a “war of choice” and attempted to reengage with the people of the MENA and hostile regimes, such as Iran, but the administration has been often indecisive over when, how and why to use democracy promotion instruments, even when presented with events that were generally understood as “historic turning points”. This has created an underlying narrative in Washington that the Obama administration has merely operated on autopilot rather than seizing what initially promised to be progressive moments in the regions history. A doctrine of strategic patience has a tendency to look like the administration is fiddling whilst Rome burns. Evidently, this narrative is problematic, but it is also understandable given the Obama administration’s emphasis on considered and gentle policy-making, which has often seen

the administration on the back foot. Unfortunately, subtlety in policy making has not equaled the tempo of events in the region, which since 2011 have seen the unprecedented outbreak of popular movements demanding not only better economic opportunities but also greater freedom, the dramatic fall of autocratic regimes, civil wars, the emergence and reemergence of terrorist organizations, and counter-revolutions. Moreover, the Obama administration's pragmatic approach of adopting policies that suit the timing of events, rather than any particular grand strategy, gives the clear impression that the U.S. is handling its declining influence in the region, or at least accepting the role of a more "self-contained" superpower (Joffe, 2004). As the geo-political and geo-strategic landscape of the MENA has transformed, the Obama administration has struggled to keep pace with events and break with old policy thinking. With its focus on correcting what were seen as America's past excesses and overwhelmed by erupting crises, the Obama administration seems to have largely left unanswered a fundamental question that its predecessor had frontally addressed, if only to be pushed back into the original dilemma: does Arab democratization – with its hiccups, risks, and many capricious side effects – help to fulfil core U.S. interests in the region, from Israel's security to the preservation of vital energy flows? And if so, should democracy promotion be elevated to the category of national security interest? These elusions and the lack of innovation is not problematic in and of itself, but is particularly troubling given the intense nature of events and spiraling violence in the region.

The Foundations of the “Freedom Agenda”

The G.W. Bush administration's rationale for promoting democracy in the MENA was a direct consequence of assessing why the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 occurred. For the G.W. Bush administration, a lack of political and economic freedom in the MENA allowed terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda to radicalize alienated individuals. Consequently, democracy promotion rose up in the political agenda. For some within the administration this was seen a policy that could both form the basis of a long-term counter-terrorism approach designed to “draining the swamp”, but also as a wider approach to engaging with the MENA region and its governments. In this regard, the first United Nations (U.N.) sponsored *Arab Human Development Report*, published in July 2002, influenced the thinking of President Bush and his National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice towards “democratizing” the Middle East. In the report, a group of prominent Arab intellectuals concluded that human development in the region required human rights and freedom, which would enable good governance, the empowerment of women, and the effective utilization of knowledge. With this, and a wider post-Cold War liberal euphoria, providing a cue, the September 2002 U.S. National Security Strategy came to argue that the 20th Century had proven there was only “a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise ... America must stand firmly for the nonnegotiable demands of human dignity: the rule of law; limits on the absolute power of the state; free speech; freedom of worship; equal justice; respect for women; religious and ethnic tolerance; and respect for private property” (The White House, 2002).

The events of September 11, 2001 demonstrated to the administration that ignoring political and economic freedom in the MENA region, in the pursuit of national security interests, was not without consequences. The policy of securing the status quo was, therefore, no longer seen as providing the wider security interests of the U.S. In effect the administration questioned the security bargains it had maintained through its bilateral relations in the region. As these ideas crystalized, President Bush announced that the U.S. would pursue a “forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East”, because poverty, stagnation, and lack of women's rights in the Middle East “are not the failures of a culture or a religion – they are the failures of political and economic doctrines” (Bush, 2003). Moreover, as these ideas sharpened, the G.W. Bush administration came to see democracy

promotion itself as a core national interest, arguing that,

As long as the Middle East remains a place of tyranny and despair and anger, it will continue to produce men and movements that threaten the safety of America and our friends. So America is pursuing a forward strategy of freedom in the greater Middle East. We will challenge the enemies of reform, confront the allies of terror, and expect a higher standard from our friends (Bush 2004).

By 2005, the Freedom Agenda became the central organizing concept around which President G.W. Bush based his second inaugural address, announcing that,

The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world. America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one ... So it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world (Bush, 2005).

As Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice would clarify in Cairo, much to the chagrin of the Mubarak regime:

We should all look to a future when every government respects the will of its citizens – because the ideal of democracy is universal. For 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region here in the Middle East – and we achieved neither. Now, we are taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people ... We know these advances will not come easily, or all at once. We know that different societies will find forms of democracy that work for them. When we talk about democracy, though, we are referring to governments that protect certain basic rights for all their citizens – among these, the right to speak freely. The right to associate. The right to worship as you wish. The freedom to educate your children – boys and girls. And freedom from the midnight knock of the secret police (Rice, 2005).

The intention behind of the Freedom Agenda was to use the full spectrum of means available to the United States for the 'advancement of human freedom and human dignity through effective democracy' (NSCT 2006: 9). This liberal grand strategy was not only seen as tapping into a rich tradition of American foreign and security policy and finally extending from Europe and other regions where the U.S. has been traditionally engaged to the Arab world, but also relied on the linkage it presented between a lack of political and economic freedom in the MENA and the rise of global terrorist organizations such as al Qaeda. Consequently, the Freedom Agenda was a fundamental part of the 2006 *U.S. National Security Strategy for Combatting Terrorism*, which outlined the broad aims of eradicating terrorism, promoting regional stability, promoting regional economic growth, and ending tyranny to create peace (see NSCT 2006). This was seen as a fundamental part of the Freedom Agenda's long-term rationale. The U.S. was not suggesting that it was prepared to abandon long-term allies in the region as a result of the Freedom Agenda. Rather, it was proposing a long-term and incremental approach to fostering the conditions necessary for democratic reforms. It is with that strategy in mind that the Freedom Agenda was initially institutionalized through initiatives such as the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), the Broader Middle East and North Africa Agreement (BMENA), and the Middle East Free Trade Agreement (MEFTA). These were followed by legislation embodied in the Freedom Agenda in the 2007 ADVANCE Democracy Act (ADA) and National Security Presidential Directive (NSPD) - 58.

The Middle East Partnership Initiative

Launched on December 12, 2002, MEPI was the Bush administration's flagship vehicle for democracy promotion under the Freedom Agenda. Situated in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Near East Affairs (NEA), it was intended to be a flexible program enjoying a high degree of independence from bureaucratic control (including through the practice of placing a political appointee at its helm) and operational autonomy which could be tailored to the specific democracy promotion requirements in its operating countries, Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, the West Bank and Gaza, and Yemen. MEPI was designed to generate short-term grants, lasting for two years or less, which focused on addressing specific challenges to democratization, and therefore overcome problems that stymied longer term development projects ran by the *United States Agency for International Development* (USAID) (see McInerney, 2008; Wittes, 2008a). To meet this goal, MEPI officials often worked with Arab governments, especially in the first two years, to invest funds in programs geared toward 'strengthening Arab civil society, encouraging micro-enterprise, expanding political participation, and promoting women's rights' (Sharp, 2005b). MEPI was also not reluctant to directly approach promising NGOs even when they lacked credentials with the local government.

The intention behind MEPI's programs was to 'broaden' the US approach to Middle East reform, such as by addressing issues around the 'freedom from fear' and 'freedom from want' highlighted in the *2002 UN Arab Human Development Report* (AHDR, 2002). Consequently, MEPI was divided into four pillars; Political, Economic, Education, and Women's issues (See Table 1). In practice, this translated into the issuing of a plethora of grants in each pillar, which were undertaken simultaneously and justified by their ability to complement and facilitate progress in each other. These include funding voter registration programs, judicial reform seminars, training sessions for female candidates for parliament, women's literacy programs, and the development of information technology infrastructures (Sharp, 2005). An element of originality rests in the fact that more than half of MEPI grants were local, worth a rough average of a few hundred thousand dollars, for projects proposed by civil groups and chosen by review within the State Department's regional embassies. Regional and country-specific grants were, however, issued.

To fund these programs in Fiscal Year [FY] 2002 and FY2003, MEPI originally relied on emergency supplemental appropriations from Congress, which combined into a total of \$119 million (see Sharp, 2005b). However, from FY2004 to FY2008 MEPI received funding from Economic Support Funds (ESF) in the annual rounds of Congressional Foreign Operations Appropriations legislation. This peaked at a single year high of \$114.2 million in FY2006, but from FY2002 to FY2008 cumulatively totaled \$497.7 million (See Table 2). Beyond the financial commitments MEPI made in the region, however, it also rose to become an important institution within the US 'democracy bureaucracy' itself. MEPI became the 'central hub' for interagency discussions under the Freedom Agenda. Consequently, MEPI was able to produce a joint review between the Department of State and USAID, in which USAID programs in the MENA region were scrutinized to ensure compliance with the MEPI goals and objectives (See Epstein et al., 2007; Sharp, 2005b; Wittes, 2008a). The results of this review were published in a *Joint Strategic Plan (JSP) for Fiscal Years 2007-2012*, by the DOS and USAID, in which a strategy of 'Transformation Diplomacy' was proposed (JSP, 2006).

The Middle East Free Trade Area

In May 2003, less than six months after the launch of MEPI, the Bush administration outlined plans to see the establishment of a *US - Middle East Free Trade Area* (MEFTA) by 2013. President Bush argued that:

The combined GDP [Gross Domestic Product] of all Arab countries is smaller than that of Spain. Their peoples have less access to the Internet than the people of Sub-Sahara Africa. The Arab world has a great cultural tradition, but is largely missing out on the economic progress of our time. Across the globe, free markets and trade have helped defeat poverty, and taught men and women the habits of liberty. So, I propose the establishment of a U.S. - Middle East free trade area within a decade, to bring the Middle East into an expanding circle of opportunity, to provide hope for the people who live in that region ... By replacing corruption and self-dealing, with free markets and fair laws, the people of the Middle East will grow in prosperity and freedom (Bush, 2003b).

MEFTA was perceived as an end goal of a series of cumulative measures targeted at twenty countries in the MENA.¹ This required, as U.S. Trade Representative Robert B. Zoellick outlined at the 2003 World Economic Forum held in Jordan, MENA countries adopting six step to create MEFTA:

1. Joining the World Trade Organization (WTO).
2. Participating in the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) program to increase US trade linkages with the MENA.
3. Negotiating and entering into new trade and investment framework agreements (TIFAs).
4. Negotiating formal bilateral investment treaties (BITs) with interested countries.
5. Negotiating comprehensive free trade agreements (FTAs) with the US, this would be combined into a sub-regional and ultimately a single MEFTA.
6. Participating in trade capacity building, by allowing the US to provide financial and technical assistance to realize the creation of open markets.

(See Bolle, 2006; Lawrence, 2006; Zoellick, 2003).

Moreover, eligibility for entering into this six-step process required minimal concessions from MENA countries. The opportunity of joining MEFTA was left open to countries that were prepared to participate in economic reform and liberalization, sought to increase trade relations with the U.S., were regarded as peaceful and not participating in primary, secondary, or tertiary boycotts of Israel (Bolle, 2006).

Whilst the establishment of a U.S.-MEFTA by 2013 was not achieved, there was movement towards its establishment throughout the Bush administration's time in office. Whilst the US already had FTAs established with Israel and Jordan before September 11, 2001, the U.S. subsequently concluded FTA agreements with Morocco, Bahrain, the West Bank and Gaza and Oman. Moreover, by the end of President Bush's tenure in office the US had 15 TIFAs and 6 BITs in place with MEFTA eligible countries, and was assisting Arab governments that had not joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) to reach this goal (See Table 3).

The rationale for attempting to institutionalize a U.S.-MEFTA was not primarily economic. Rather, in addition to envisaged economic benefits, MEFTA was seen as a method of winning 'hearts and minds' by creating greater prosperity and peace through trade, whilst laying the foundations for

¹ These countries included Algeria, Bahrain, Cyprus, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya,

liberal reform in the region. MEFTA sought to work with MEPI to use FTAs as a democratizing tool, by promoting structural, economic and governance reforms. Accordingly, trade promotion and trade-related technical assistance programs were established, focusing on teaching better methods of making government regulation transparent, promoting the rule of contract law, and protecting intellectual property (see Wittes, 2008a, Bolle, 2006; Lawrence, 2006).

The Broader Middle East North Africa Initiative

The U.S. launched the *Broader Middle East and North Africa* initiative during its 2004 G8 presidency, intending to add a multilateral dimension to the Freedom Agenda. The initiative was the product of a working paper, which suggested that the G8 create a *Greater Middle East Initiative*² (GMEI), which agreed upon a set of common reform priorities towards the MENA. This attempted to replicate many of MEPI's ambitions and tried to create a multilateral goal of 'promoting democracy and good governance, building a knowledge society, and expanding economic opportunities' for the MENA. As a result, the BMENA initiative was marketed as a 'partnership' between the G8, the US, and European nations, with governments, business and civil society of the MENA region working towards 'freedom, democracy and prosperity for all' (see DOS, 2004; G8-BMENA, 2006).

The central initiative that emerged from the June 2004 Sea Island summit was the *Forum for the Future*. This was intended to be an annual meeting in which governments, business and civil society groups from the G8 and MENA would meet and discuss reform measures. The first of these meetings took place in December 2004 in Morocco, the second in November 2005 in Bahrain, the third in December 2006 in Jordan, and the fourth in 2008 in the United Arab Emirates. Although there was intended to be a forum in Yemen in 2007 this was not held because of U.S. efforts to rejuvenate Israeli-Palestinian peace talks at the Annapolis Conference in Maryland (Wittes, 2008a). In addition to the *Forum for the Future*, the BMENA initiative was comprised of several small multinational and national projects. Out of the subsequent *Forums for the Future* four main 'working groups' were established:

- 'Tax Administration and Policy'; led by Egypt
- 'Financial Systems' combining Banking System, Financial Sector Reform and Regulation, Financial Services, and Capital Market Development; led by Bahrain
- 'Microfinance'; led by Jordan
- 'Financing Poverty Alleviation'; led by Yemen. (see G8-BMENA, 2006)

A further multilateral program launched under the BMENA initiative was the *Foundation for the Future*. Announced in November 2005, the foundation was intended to pool and distribute international funds to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the region. As Condoleezza Rice announced at the 2005 *Forum for the Future*:

The Foundation will provide grants to help civil society strengthen the rule of law, to protect basic civil liberties, and ensure greater opportunity for health and education. But most importantly, the Foundation is a sign that citizens have to be trusted who are working for democratic reform in particular countries, and cities, and villages to use their grant money for the greatest good that they see fit (Rice, 2005b).

² The GMEI was the original name given to BMENA. The name was changed due to objections that came from MENA governments.

The largest donations to this fund came from the U.S., which in FY2006 dedicated \$35 Million of MEPIs funding to the foundation, but other donors included Denmark, the European Commission, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Jordan, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, and the United Kingdom (FFF, 2008; Wittes, 2008a). In total the fund raised approximately \$60 million, and by the year end of 2008 the foundation had a net total of \$26 million in available assets for future projects (DOS, 2009; FFF, 2009; Sharp, 2005a).

The ADVANCE Democracy Act of 2007 and the National Security Presidential Directive-58

Whilst MEPI, MEFTA and the BMENA were central to the Bush administration's Freedom Agenda, this institutional layer was buttressed with a legislative layer. This layer was manifested itself in the codification of the ADVANCE Democracy Act of 2007³ (ADA), which was passed on August 3, 2007, as part of H.R.1. *Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007*.⁴ The significance of ADA is multifaceted. The bill was originally proposed in 2005, sponsored by Representative Tom Lantos (D-CA) and Representative Frank Wolf (R-VA) in the House, and Senator John McCain (R-AZ) and Senator Joe Lieberman (D-CT) in the Senate. Notably this legislation was inspired by and attributed to Mark Palmer's book *Breaking the Real Axis of Evil: How to Oust the World's Last Dictators by 2025* (see Lantos, 2005; Palmer, 2003). Accordingly, the ADA asserts that:

It is the policy of the United States to promote freedom and democracy in foreign countries as a fundamental component of United States foreign policy, along with other key foreign policy goals (2007).⁵

The importance of the ADA is that 'the act for the first time declares with the force of law that supporting democracy and human rights abroad shall be a fundamental component of U.S. foreign policy' (Mann, 2007). To realize this objective, the ADA legislated changes throughout the U.S. foreign policy bureaucracy. The first of these was the creation of a *Democracy Liaison Office* (DLO), with new officers to serve under the supervision of the Assistant Secretary of State. The ADA did not prescribe the exact institutional location that these officers would be situated. However, the legislation did account for the possibility of posting Democracy Liaison Officers to regional diplomacy offices, multilateral organizations, and U.S. combatant commands (2007). Additionally, the ADA formally instructed Chiefs of Mission in nondemocratic and democratic transition countries to:

Develop, as part of annual program planning, a strategy to promote democratic principles, practices, and values in each such foreign country and to provide support, as appropriate, to nongovernmental organizations, individuals, and movements in each such country that are committed to democratic principles, practices, and values (2007).⁶

These instructions were accompanied by orders to publicly condemn violations of internationally recognized human rights, to visit local landmarks associated with non-violent protest, and to meet with government leaders to discuss human rights and democratization. The ADA also required:

³ This acronym stands for *Advance Democratic Values, Address Nondemocratic Countries, and Enhance Democracy Act*.

⁴ See H.R.1 Public Law 110-53, 22 USC 8201n; Title XXI, Sections 2101-62, as passed by the 110th Congress.

⁵ The line "along with other key foreign policy goals" was not in the 2005 version of the bill submitted to the House and Senate.

⁶ Definitions of nondemocratic and democratic transition countries are provided in the legislation.

- The creation of a *Democracy Fellowship Program* to allow DOS officers to work with relevant congressional committees, NGOs and multilateral organisations. The aim of this was to ‘enable officers of the Department [DOS] to gain an additional perspective on democracy promotion in foreign countries’ (2007).
- Enhanced training for Foreign Service Officers on protecting human rights and supporting democratisation.
- Making support for democracy and human rights a criterion for awards, performance pay, and promotions within the DOS.
- Establishing an Office for Multilateral Democracy Promotion.
- The change of title for the annual report on *Supporting Human Rights and Democracy: The U.S. Record*, to the *Annual Report on Advancing Freedom and Democracy*.
- The payment of \$14 million from the US to the United Nation’s Democracy Fund.

In addition to these official requirements, the ADA also presented a ‘sense of Congress’:

- Urging the Community of Democracies to establish a headquarters and formalize its organization.
- Urging USAID and the Secretary of State to develop guidelines to direct and coordinate U.S. democracy promotion efforts.
- Commended the Secretary of State for creating an *Advisory Committee on Democracy Promotion* (ACDP), and asserted that this committee ‘should play a significant role in the Department’s [DOS] transformational diplomacy’ (2007).

Combined, the steps outlined by the ADA represent a significant attempt to reform the U.S. foreign policy bureaucracy, and heighten considerations of democracy promotion in policy-making. Consequently, the ADA represents an important legal basis for U.S. foreign policy to commit to democracy promotion and the Freedom Agenda more widely.

In addition to the ADA, the Bush administration codified the policies and practices of the Freedom Agenda on the July 17 2008 in *National Security Presidential Directive* (NSPD) 58. Although the exact wording of this document is unknown, the Bush administration elected to partially declassify NSPD-58 on October 9, 2008. Entitled *Institutionalising the Freedom Agenda*, NSPD-58 states that,

It is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in the world. This policy goal was established and elaborated in the 2006 National Security Strategy of the United States of America, which declares the promotion of freedom, justice, human dignity, and effective democratic institutions to be central goals of our national security (DOS, 2008).

Moreover, building on the ADA’s legislative provisions, NSPD-58 calls for:

- Cabinet and sub-Cabinet officials meeting with foreign leaders to communicate consistently the U.S. priority on democracy promotion.
- The Secretary of State, in coordination with other departments and agencies, to establish stronger cooperation with other democratic countries; to promote fundamental freedoms, develop, adopt, and pursue strategies to advance common interests through new and existing bilateral and multilateral mechanisms, and provide political, economic, security, and other support to fellow and new democracies (DOS, 2008).

The Decline of the Bush Freedom Agenda

The Freedom Agenda was certainly given a high profile under the G.W. Bush administration. Not only was it central to the soaring rhetoric of the second inaugural address, but also since leaving office the President and members of the Bush administration have sought to define it as their central legacy. Indeed, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, when defining the core characteristics of the Bush era foreign policy asserted that, ‘over the past eight years’ in the ‘fog of events’, the Bush administration was guided by ‘principles’, ‘mission’ and a ‘commitment to an unwavering belief in the power of freedom’ (Rice 2009). The Secretary of State also added that there were now, ‘democratically elected leaders in Kosovo, Lebanon, Liberia, Afghanistan, and Iraq’, and that these countries ‘have experienced a new birth of freedom ... Because when impatient patriots looked for support in their struggle for liberation, America ... stood with them’ (Rice 2009).

A closer analysis of the Freedom Agenda, however, produces a rather more balanced and sobering assessment. The peak years of the Freedom Agenda were between 2004-2006, with lofty and determined rhetoric coming from the Bush Administration, the “Cedar Revolution” in Lebanon where a popular mobilization triggered by the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri pushed Syria to remove its troops from the country, elections in Palestine, the continued effort to build a functional democracy in Iraq, and other steps around the region. Moreover, there is a broad consensus that there were real advances in democratic freedoms in Egypt in 2004 and 2005. In the presidential election, for the first time, Hosni Mubarak ran against opponents rather than being endorsed in a yes or no referendum. In the parliamentary elections, Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated independent candidates won close to 20% of the seats. However, after the elections Mubarak imprisoned Ayman Nour, the runner-up in the presidential contest, and rolled back freedoms.

Consequently, whilst it was the case that between 2002 and 2006 sections of the Bush administration were pushing for the democratization of the MENA region, including through adopting a tougher stance vis a vis traditional partners such as Mubarak’s Egypt, this dissipated as Islamist groups hostile to Washington and its allies came to power and as autocrats managed to refocus the U.S. agenda on joint efforts to maintain security. Indeed, with the electoral victory of Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya (Hamas) in the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections, the realities of the “Islamist Dilemma” were realized, demonstrating the tensions between promoting democracy and pursuing other U.S. national interests. This marked a significant turning point for the Freedom Agenda. In spite of Hamas being elected to power in one of the freest elections the region has ever had, the U.S. did not recognize the result. Beyond the political reasons for not working with an organization that does not recognize Israel’s right to exist, there were legal constraints. The administration’s lawyers pointed out that it would be illegal for the U.S. government to work with a group designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the State Department. More widely, Hamas’ electoral victory also represented the acme of a pattern where Islamic groups, hostile to Washington and Israel, won significant gains through elections. This included the Muslim brotherhood in Egypt, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Shiites backed by militias in Iraq (Weisman 2006a). This was coupled with the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war in Lebanon and increasing civil violence in Iraq despite hopes that the elections would calm an increasingly violent insurgency (Kurth 2006). This sent a clear signal that promoting democracy, whether that is through toppling tyrants or by insisting on elections, carried risks that the Bush administration failed to recognize because of ideological blind spots.

A closer analysis of the Bush administration’s Freedom Agenda also brings into question its coherence as an overall policy. It was widely acknowledged that, rather than being underpinned by a coherent strategy, there was in fact a lack of strategic guidance that led Freedom Agenda institutions to fund democratization projects in a ‘hodgepodge’ manner (Hawthorne 2005). As J. Scott Carpenter outlined in his role of overseeing MEPI,

We don't know yet how best to promote democracy in the Arab Middle East. I mean we just don't know. It's the early days ... I think there are times when you throw spaghetti against the wall and see if it sticks (in Finkel 2005).

Nevertheless, it is clear from extensive discussions with those overseeing the Freedom Agenda, and by taking an overarching view of its programming that two dominant theories of democratization were at work and were particularly tied to the importance of economic freedom. Indeed, as *table four* demonstrates, whilst there were conceptual commitments to political reform, educational reform and women's rights across the Freedom Agenda institutions, the core emphasis on programming between MEPI, MEFTA and the BMENA was economic reform. This was to particularly take the form of MENA countries adopting free trade and free market rules. The importance of this to the Bush administration's implicit theory of democratization was that free markets and free trade rules are both economic and political. They were not only seen as necessary for generating wealth, but as a means of enhancing the overall freedoms enjoyed by the individual. For those promoting the incremental transformation of the MENA that characterized the Freedom Agenda, economic freedom was linked to an inherent understanding of how economic freedom can contribute to social modernization in two ways. The first of these resonates with what political scientists refer to as modernization thesis. The theory links liberalization and democratization to political economy, by positing that positive political change can be achieved through pursuing policies of economic growth that result from integration into the global market and the adoption of free market rules. Not only are these seen as a method of reducing poverty and unemployment, but also of creating a form of modernization that over time creates democracies. Within this schema economic freedom is paramount, and capitalism is seen as fundamental to processes of democratization because it produces wealth that is assumed will "trickle down" and lead to a higher level of mass consumption, and a well-educated and independent middle class that will demand cultural changes favorable to democracy.

The second implicit model of democratization embedded within the Freedom Agenda's core programming was that which related economic freedom and modernization with the coproduction of the rule of law. Within this schema, the promotion of economic reform was seen as a method of promoting good governance, which it was believed could contribute to the creation of democratic governance in the long term. The importance of this rule of law approach is that economic reform is being understood to be a methodology in the promotion of gradual political liberalization and democratization processes. Economic governance was therefore not only seen by the Bush administration as a method of growing innovation, investment and industry, but also transparency and accountability. This in turn, was seen as a method of indirectly promoting independent judiciaries and free presses, which it is hoped will symbiotically assist in gradual strengthening of civil societies, human rights and free elections as the cornerstones of democratic processes and institutions. Evidently, both focusing on economic reform as a method of producing both modernization and the rule of law was intended to create a slow gestation of democratization process in the MENA. Thus, in spite of the high rhetoric and perception of democracy being promoted at the barrel of a gun, the Freedom Agenda actually followed a measured and incremental approach which was born out in at its conceptual, institutional, programming and legislative levels. Moreover, with the cost of election proving to be high, after 2006 this cautious approach persisted throughout the rest of the Bush administration's tenure in office and was the dominant approach inherited by the Obama administration.

President Obama: The End of the Freedom Agenda?

Upon taking office in January 2009, many analysts labeled President Obama a foreign policy ‘realist’, predicting the end of the Freedom Agenda. Fareed Zakaria, for example, argued that ‘Obama is a realist, by temperament, learning, and instinct’ and has said ‘almost nothing about broader goals like spreading democracy, protecting human rights, or assisting in women's education’ (Zakaria 2009). Specifically on the MENA region, Francis Fukuyama dismissed what the administration had said on democracy assistance as mere ‘lip service’ and argued that the U.S. has returned to a traditional policy of ‘reliance on Arab strongmen’ (Fukuyama 2010). For many analysts, at least, the Obama administration had terminated the Freedom Agenda and returned to the old status quo policy. Nevertheless, a closer analysis of how the Obama administration has allowed the Freedom Agenda to evolve within the confines of a pragmatic approach to the MENA region produces a more nuanced analysis. This in turn is more in line with Thomas Carothers’ 2007 forecast that,

The United States is not going to embrace a substantially more idealist position with respect to democracy promotion in the world in the next five to 10 years. It has too many substantial realist interests in Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, Kazakhstan, Ethiopia, and so forth that it is not going to turn its back on. It’s that simple. At the same time, the United States is also not going to turn its back on democracy promotion in some kind of stern realist realignment (Carothers 2007: 7).

Indeed, the Obama administration proved keenly aware that, for many observers, the Freedom Agenda had been exclusively conflated with the war in Iraq. As a result, the administration was vehement in distancing itself from the Iraq war and calling for a ‘new beginning’ in a speech made at Cairo University. As President Obama argued,

I know there has been controversy about the promotion of democracy in recent years, and much of this controversy is connected to the war in Iraq. So let me be clear: No system of government can or should be imposed by one nation on any other (Obama 2009).

This marked an unusual step of openly criticizing both the previous administration and recent American military action, in what the President publically termed a ‘war of choice’ in Iraq (Obama 2009). If the Freedom Agenda was conflated with regime change, then the administration made clear that democracy promotion as a central platform of U.S.-Middle East relations was to end. However, a closer reading of the speech is important, as the President added,

That does not lessen my commitment, however, to governments that reflect the will of the people ... Suppressing ideas never succeeds in making them go away. America respects the right of all peaceful and law-abiding voices to be heard around the world, even if we disagree with them. And we will welcome all elected, peaceful governments – provided they govern with respect for all their people. This last point is important because there are some who advocate for democracy only when they’re out of power; once in power, they are ruthless in suppressing the rights of others. So no matter where it takes hold, government of the people and by the people sets a single standard for all who would hold power: You must maintain your power through consent, not coercion; you must respect the rights of minorities, and participate with a spirit of tolerance and compromise; you must place the interests of your people and the legitimate workings of the political process above your party. Without these ingredients, elections alone do not make true democracy (Obama, 2009).

The shift promoted by Obama was significant at the conceptual and declaratory level with its emphasis on “mutual respect” with a more muted nod in the direction of universal principles. This set the stage for a wider shift in tone and tactics, along with a more subtle change in substance. This was evident in the Obama administration’s engagement strategy that played down controversial human rights violations in China, Russia, and Iran—a policy that received particularly strong criticism when the regime in Tehran crushed “the Green movement,” a mass protest movement against the alleged falsification of presidential election results in June 2009, and the U.S. remained relatively quiet.⁷ Moreover, when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton emphasized development along with diplomacy and defense, many came to ask if the administration had abandoned the fourth ‘D’ of democracy altogether (Bouchet, 2011).

The lack of emphasis on democracy promotion within the administrations language is not just a desire to distance itself from the legacy of the Freedom Agenda, but rather, it is also part of a subtle conceptual shift. Increasingly, the Obama administration has seen democratization as a part of a gradual process of sustainable development and modernization, not spurred on simply through free trade. This is a development of ideas outlined by candidate Obama, who argued that,

In the 21st century, progress must mean more than a vote at the ballot box – it must mean freedom from fear and freedom from want. We cannot stand for the freedom of anarchy. Nor can we support the globalization of the empty stomach. We need new approaches to help people to help themselves (Obama 2007: 2).

Moreover, the President placed individuals who shared the same rationale in key positions. For example, Susan Rice, the U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, wrote a critique of the Freedom Agenda before taking her position in the administration, arguing that,

Promoting both development and democracy in far away countries is a 21st century security imperative. We need a dual strategy. We must combine effective formulas for fostering freedom though building civil society and transparent democratic institutions with a determination to “make poverty history”. If we fail to do so, we will have squandered a crucial chance to accomplish what President Bush boldly staked out as his ambitious legacy: “to advance the cause of liberty and build a safer world” (Rice and Graff 2009).

For the Obama administration, certainly before the complications of the Arab Awakening, was institutionalizing democracy promotion along with its development agenda. This has created amalgamate of development, democracy, security and diplomacy agendas, which was highly evident in the launch of the first Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR), and the assertion that the US should use what Hillary Clinton termed ‘smart power’ (2009). As the Secretary of State asserted at the launch of the QDDR,

we are working for a world in which more people in more places can live in freedom, can enjoy the fruits of democracy and economic opportunity and have a chance to live up to their own God-given potential ... instead of simply trying to adjust to the way things are, we need to get in the habit of looking to the horizon and planning for how we want things to be ... We will be doing this quadrennial review, which will be, we hope, a tool to provide us with both short-term and long-term blueprints for how to advance our foreign policy objectives and our values and interests (Clinton 2009).

⁷ Although Iran is not an Arab country, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has frequently referred to the suppressed Green movement as the true beginning of the Arab Spring.

The release of the QDDR in late 2010 reaffirmed the administration's rationale for articulating democracy support and development policy,

Through an aggressive and affirmative development agenda and commensurate resources, we can strengthen the regional partners we need to help us stop conflict and counter global criminal networks; build a stable, inclusive global economy with new sources of prosperity; advance democracy and human rights; and ultimately position ourselves to better address key global challenges by growing the ranks of prosperous, capable and democratic states that can be our partners in the decades ahead (QDDR 2010: ix).

The importance of this is not only the manner in which it builds on the rationale behind the Freedom Agenda in its addition of development as an approach to democracy promotion, but also as an early demonstration of the administration's doctrine of strategic patience and persistence.

The Arab Awakening and Obama's Doctrine of Strategic Patience

Prior to the 2011 revolutions sweeping across the MENA region, the Obama administration was already engaged in reevaluating U.S. policy towards the region. Indeed, on August 12, 2010, President Obama wrote a five-page memo on *Political Reform in the Middle East and North Africa* and sent it to his top advisors. It argued that, 'Increased repression could threaten the political and economic stability of some of our allies, leave us with fewer capable, credible partners who can support our regional priorities, and further alienate citizens in the region'. Moreover, the President argued that 'our regional and international credibility will be undermined if we are seen or perceived to be backing repressive regimes and ignoring the rights and aspirations of citizens' (in Lizza, 2011). As a result, the President directed senior members of his national security staff, Samantha Power, Gayle Smith and Dennis Ross, to lead a review that would provide "tailored" country strategies for political reform.

This "tailored" approach was a clear continuation of the mandate in which MEPI had been set up for by the Bush administration. Accordingly, as Table Two demonstrates, the Obama administration has continued to fund MEPI at broadly the same level as the G.W. Bush administration, averaging approximately \$71 million of funding a year between FY2010 – FY 2014. This has taken the cumulative total of MEPI funding between FY2002 and FY2014 to approximately \$902 million, and if the Obama administration continues on this funding trajectory, by FY2017 the cumulative total of MEPI funding will be approximately \$1.1 billion over sixteen years. Indeed, with the Obama administration's funding of MEPI on target to slightly surpass the cumulative total of the Bush administration, it is difficult to argue that there has been an explicitly realist turn under the Obama administration. Moreover, this has come on top of the Obama administration retargeting more of MEPI's budget to local grant funding for projects proposed by NGOs. Indeed, under the Obama administration, MEPI funding for local NGOs was set at fifteen percent, up from single digits under the Bush administration. This proved particularly valuable in 2011, as interviews with multiple recipients of MEPI funding across the region revealed that this was well received. Indeed, there was a notable shift in tone, where interviewees in the region argued that this was "a less colonial approach", and lowered the perspective that this was just part of an "American development industry" which "benefited them [the U.S. democracy assistance community], more than us [the recipients]".⁸

⁸ Interviews with MEPI fund recipients conducted in Cairo throughout 2011 by Oz Hassan.

Conducting this review and having MEPI in place should have led to the Obama administration being better able to respond to the tumult across the MENA. Indeed, no sooner than those carrying out the review into political reform in the region had begun finalizing their work, a vegetable vendor in Tunisia performed an act of self-immolation that would spark waves of popular protest across the regions. The events of December 17, 2010 provided a spark that ignited a tinderbox built upon political, economic and social problems (Croft and Hassan, 2015). As events moved quickly and often unpredictably, President Ben Ali was deposed without the U.S. playing an important role. This reflected the low U.S. diplomatic profile in the country, in spite of MEPI having a regional office in Tunis. Indeed, the U.S.-Tunisian relationship was a low priority, built mainly around a counter-terrorism relationship and Ben Ali's attempts to eradicate the main political opposition party in the country, the Islamic Tendency Movement (*Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique*, MTI), also known as En-Nahda (Renaissance). Once the protests were under way, the Obama administration attempted to remain neutral and urged restraint. For months after the outbreak of the uprising, the U.S. was at best a tertiary player in Tunisia as historic events unfolded.

It was not until protests spread to Egypt that the Obama administration was forced to make tougher strategic decisions. As the protests continued and levels of violence increased, it became evident that the long-term strategic partnership between the Mubarak regime and the U.S. was in tension with supporting democratization prospects and protecting human rights. Moreover, as protests began to swell around the country, the administration broke with its non-interference strategy and on February 1, President Obama spoke with Mubarak. This was followed with a public statement on the situation, in which President Obama argued that,

Throughout this period, we've stood for a set of core principles. First, we oppose violence ... Second, we stand for universal values, including the rights of the Egyptian people to freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and the freedom to access information ... Third, we have spoken out on behalf of the need for change ... the status quo is not sustainable and ... change must take place ... what I indicated tonight to President Mubarak -- is my belief that an orderly transition must be meaningful, it must be peaceful, and it must begin now (Obama 2011).

Just ten days later on February 11, President Mubarak capitulated to calls for him to step down under the weighty realization that his position was no longer tenable. Much to the chagrin on allies such as Saudi Arabia, the U.S. had effectively abandoned a long-term strategic ally, and cast aside a security guarantee under the force of popular protest and other domestic political pressures.

The contagion of popular protests was soon spreading from Morocco to Oman and beyond, rapidly converting sceptics in the U.S., Europe, and indeed around the world, that "Arab exceptionalism" had finally been proven a mistaken notion. Even as this realization was settling in, largely uncontrollable events were out pacing the administration's ability to produce a strategy, forcing reactive rather than proactive policies to take shape. This was highly evident in Libya as popular protests were deteriorating into civil war. As an armed opposition group began to confront Colonel Gaddafi's regime in Libya, it became evident that this was not the start of a peaceful transition process. The Interim Transitional National Council were able to establish their authority over the cities of Benghazi and Tobruk, whilst claiming to have taken control of many other major cities throughout the country, only to be met by Colonel Gaddafi's forces. By late February and early March, Gaddafi's forces had driven the rebels back to Benghazi in a counteroffensive, and by the middle of March were threatening to take Benghazi. With European governments, the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council all calling for the establishment of a no-fly zone, in response to Gaddafi's threats to crush the rebellion, the Obama administration finally decided to intervene to prevent a humanitarian disaster (Hassan, 2013). Crucial to this decision were the cases made by

Samantha Power and Hillary Clinton who were able to persuade the President that intervention was the best course of action over more sceptical colleagues (Stolberg 2011). Consequently, the administration supported the UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which authorized NATO intervention to protect civilians (see Bellamy and Williams 2011). By March 19, the Obama administration was “leading from behind” in a NATO intervention that would last seven months and decisively contribute to the rebel victory (Lizza 2011).

The importance of the first year of the Arab Awakening was that it forced the U.S. to make serious choices over whether to support democracy and potentially break with important strategic partnerships, or attempt to hold on to the status quo. Throughout 2011 the Obama administration was forced to intervene in the unfolding crises, and as Thomas Carothers notes, ‘the administration faced a defining question of democracy support: Should it now shift gears and put democracy at the core of its policy in the Middle East?’ (2011: 29). In that respect, the U.S. response to the Arab Awakening was characterised by its pragmatic nature. The Obama administration for the most part supported democratic transitions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Yet, this was done through cautious, restrained and careful strategizing. Yet, with other strategic partners, the U.S. was silent even as protests took shape. This was particularly notable as criticism of Bahraini human rights abuses were muted; along with commentary on Saudi Arabia’s attempts to quell protests in the Eastern Province. Similarly, the U.S. remained a very supportive partner of King Mohamed VI’s monarchical rule in Morocco, preferring constitutional referendum and top-down reforms that promised to be limited and gradual at best, to upheaval in this fairly stable and *relatively* liberal longtime ally.

In retrospect, the Arab Awakening provided significant opportunities that the administration seized only cautiously and largely reactively, gaining ground on some but missing others. The Obama administration certainly moved swiftly to help buttress democratic trends in Tunisia, Egypt and to a lesser extent Libya. In Tunisia and Egypt, for example, the administration spoke out in favour of democratic transitions and provided multiple sources of funding to support a new range of programmes from ‘elections administration, civic education and, and political party development’ (Carothers 2011: 31). In terms of concrete policies, Obama announced the MENA “Trade and Investment Partnership Initiative” (MENA-TIP) to facilitate trade and investment with the region, which a primary focus on Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia, and to a lesser extent Libya. This has the objectives of:

- Facilitating trade within the region.
- Promoting greater trade and investment with the U.S. and other global markets.
- Provide a pathway for MENA partners willing to adopt trade liberalization to create a regional trade agreement.

In a similar vein to the Bush administration’s MEFTA initiative, MENA-TIP is aimed at providing a framework for intraregional trade liberalisation and movement towards globalised trade imperatives. This is in line with long term U.S. trade policy seeking to open international markets under rules based systems that successive U.S. governments believe is not only beneficial for the modernisation of countries, regions and the wider international system, but also for creating long-term sustainable jobs within the U.S. itself (Akhtar et. al., 2013: 17-19). Accordingly, MENA-TIP, which is overseen by the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR), acts as the primary and most concrete policy vehicle produced in response to the Arab popular protests. With a focus on investment, trade facilitation, small and medium enterprise (SME) support, regulatory practices and transparency, MENA-TIP builds on the same rationale as MEFTA, bringing the USTR together with the Departments of Commerce, State and the Treasury (see Akhtar et. al., 2013: 18). As a result of MENA-TIP bilateral agreements have been made with Morocco and Jordan, and intentions for an

action plan with Egypt have been announced. In Egypt especially, the focus has been on boosting exports, promoting investment and strengthening Egyptian SMEs. However, in both Morocco and Jordan, bilateral agreements on the “Joint Principles for International Investment” have been made, along with “Joint Principles for Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Service” (Akhtar et. al., 2013: 19). The latter is particularly important as whilst the focus of the agreement is on expanding ICT networks and services because they are seen as ‘powerful tools for promoting economic development’, this can also be seen as part of what Hassan refers to as the “digitisation of the Freedom Agenda” under the Obama administration (2013: 165-171; also see Hassan and Monier, 2013).

Building on the trade policy put forward under MENA-TIP, the Obama administration also set up the Office of the Special Coordinator for Middle East Transitions (D/MET) at the State Department in September 2011. Led by Ambassador William B. Taylor, Jr., a veteran of U.S. democracy assistance in the post-Soviet space, and reporting to Deputy Secretary of State William J. Burns, D/MET is responsible for implementing a coordinated interagency strategy for assisting the young democracies of Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. This included the responsibilities for:

- Developing comprehensive assistance strategies and ensuring that assistance tools (USAID, INL, MEPI, DRL, and others, as well as PM/DOD programs as appropriate) are aligned with U.S. policy goals.
- Liaise closely with the interagency to insure that State and USAID assistance tools are reinforced with a whole-of-government package of technical, economic, and other support.
- Work with international donors and institutions on a coordinated assistance strategies.
- Evaluate the feasibility and facilitation of the recovery of any illegally acquired assets.
- Keep Congressional members and staff advised and informed, seeking Hill input and support.
- Develop and maintain links with Washington's think-tank community.
- Mobilize resources from the U.S. business, foundation, university and other sectors to support Middle East transitions.
- Ensure close assistance coordination between Washington and the U.S. Embassies in Tunis, Cairo, and Tripoli.
- Support interagency processes, goals and tasks.

(in DOS 2011).

Through undertaking these responsibilities, the Coordinator’s objectives were to focus on the mobilisation and coordination of U.S. efforts with regards to:

- The support free, fair and competitive elections.
- The assistance of the Egyptian, Tunisian, and Libyan people’s creation of enduring democratic institutions.
- The Enabling of current transitional authorities and future elected governments to deliver services and sufficiently meet citizen expectations, including through support for civil society and the private sector.
- Identifying ways to support key sectors of the Tunisian, Egyptian, and Libyan economies;
- Increasing outreach to emergent political, economic and social forces in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya (in DOS 2011).

In practice, the office has also spent a significant amount of time working on assistance to the opposition in Syria. Unlike the FREEDOM Support Act Office, which was set up to provide assistance to the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union 20 years ago, and where

Taylor previously worked, the D/MET was not established by legislation but by the initiative of the administration. D/MET has however had serious shortfalls, not least of which was that the Special Coordinator position has been left vacant since the departure of Ambassador Taylor in 2013. Combined with MEPI's broader reorganisation and integration into the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA) there has been a wider sense of disappointment with MEPI and D/MET being undermined by career diplomats within NEA, sections of which have been resistant to any democracy promotion agenda in the region since its inception (see Hassan, 2013: 127-131).

Building on the multilateral work carried out by D/MET, which has a particular focus on cooperation with the European Union and Member States, the Obama administration has sought to spearhead multilateral initiatives through the G8 Deauville Partnership with Arab Countries in Transition. Put forward at the May 2011 G8 summit in France, the Deauville Partnership includes, the G7 countries Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, United Kingdom, and the United States (Russia was an original member of the partnership as a G8 member, until the suspension of collaboration in Spring 2014, and Germany has taken over the role of Chair of the partnership). Beyond the G7, the Deauville Partnership also includes the EU and regional partners Kuwait, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, along with international financial institutions and organisations the Islamic Development Bank, the African Development Bank, the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, the Arab Monetary Fund, the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the International Finance Corporation, the International Monetary Fund, the African Development Bank, the OPEC Fund for International Development, and the World Bank.

Beyond tensions between the G8 members, exacerbated by events in the Ukraine, the Deauville Partnership has faced a number of challenges. Notably, there has been confusion as to the actual amount of financial resources, which consistently failed to match initial commitments, tarnished the project from the very beginning. Perhaps more importantly, initiatives such as Deauville could not help but confirming waning Western influence. Beleaguered by the protracted effects of the global financial crisis, Western economies proved unable not only to mobilize resources on the scale that was needed to support transition but were also outcompeted by the Gulf monarchies, engaged as they were in turning the threat of political opening into an opportunity for expanding regional influence through proxies. Instead of a much evoked Arab Marshall Plan for a revival of the Arab economies that could have been combined with regional integration, funds channelled from the Gulf and other wealthy donors risked splitting the region along the divides of the Arab Cold War between Iran on one side and Saudi Arabia on the other. The new pro-Brotherhood agendas of actors such as Qatar and Turkey further complicated the picture, opening the way to multiple intersecting proxy conflicts.

The hijacking of transitions by forces which had not originally participated in the revolts and by extra-regional actors, contributed to transforming political crises into security situations, as much of the region plunged into strife, the civil war in Syria and Libya being the most violent cases of a wider continuum of heightened instability. Not even two years into what had to hastily been portrayed as a "new era", it had become evident that the region's security architecture has begun to erode and the prospects for democracy taking hold in all but Tunisia were highly unlikely, when not impossible, in the near term. The complex civil wars in Syria and Iraq, and the rise of the so-called Islamic State, epitomize a break down of the region's security architecture and an upsurge of new extremist jihadi fighters which have proactively exploited the power vacuums left by weakening regimes and the withdrawal of the U.S. from Iraq. In this rapidly deteriorating strategic and security context, the trajectory of the U.S.-Egyptian relationship has been emblematic of larger difficulties and dilemmas.

After the fall of Mubarak, the Obama administration had decided to work with the new Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, accepting the Muslim Brotherhood as a legitimate political actor with a vast and long-standing constituency of followers in the country. This was seen as possibly supporting Egypt's democratization in the long, run both because of the political opening that this process entailed and because the hope was that societal pressures would force the Brotherhood to gradually adopt a democratic agenda, beyond the electoral democracy that had led it to power. The administration took this path despite significant opposition to and fear of the Brotherhood within the American public, within the U.S. Congress, and amongst long-standing U.S. strategic partners in the region such as Saudi Arabia.

By early 2013, however, this hope had already been largely shattered by the Egyptian state's hardening approach to independent civil society actors, including the persecution of U.S. organizations and individuals that had been involved in democracy support activities relying on foreign funding. When in the summer 2013 President Morsi was ousted by the Egyptian military under mounting popular pressure, the U.S. condemned the ouster but avoided characterizing it as a military coup, which would entail legal restrictions on aid. As a matter of fact, Egypt has undergone a counter-revolutionary process since 2013, cracking down on the Muslim Brotherhood with what Human Rights Watch has termed "excessive lethal force" whilst committing a trail of other human rights violations.ⁱⁱ The freedoms that Morsi had failed to enshrine in the post-Mubarak Constitution continue to remain elusive. Security and the economy, certainly not democratization, are the leading concerns and areas of focus of the restored regime. Under the guise of its own "war on terror" the Egyptian government is increasingly intervening in the Sinai Peninsular to tackle the terrorist threat from groups such as Ajnad Misr, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, and the Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin fi Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis, and attempting to cut off supplies of weapons and fighters flowing into the country through its western border with Libya.

This security-oriented approach of the re-emerged Egyptian establishment under the leadership of President Sisi has created new tensions with the U.S. Not unlike its European counterparts, the Obama administration questions the rationale of repressive policies which risk exacerbating the security threats both Egypt and the U.S. face. This has not led, however, to serious reactions except for the temporary suspension of shares of the aid that the U.S. has historically provided to Egypt, especially in the defense and security domains. There is no denying in Washington that Egyptian-U.S. relations are at a low, with the partial exception of the continuing reliance of Egypt as an anchor state by the U.S. defence establishment. But the reason is not Egypt's failure at democratization; rather, what is negatively affecting the relationship is the increasingly self-reliant approach of the Egyptian ruling elites even as the state remains extremely sclerotic and vulnerable. Egypt's flirtation with Putin's Russia and its unilateral actions in Libya cause more concerns in Washington than lack of political reform.

Indeed, while worried about authoritarian regression in Egypt and other contexts, the Obama administration has aligned itself with the regional shift to a security-first approach, which in the present context cannot but to weaken what is left of the democratic impulses of 2011. While U.S. funding channelled to the region has overall remained steady in recent years, the shares for direct democracy assistance have declined in most contexts in favour of security priorities, at least as compared with the years immediately following the uprisings.

Even in Tunisia, regarded by many as the most like country in the region to transition into a democracy, there has been an upsurge in terrorist violence leading to the National Constituent Assembly opening the door to retrenching hard-won freedoms under antiterrorism legislation. The U.S. has indeed promoted the notion of a "Tunisian model", encouraged by a political transition that has stayed the course through a series of successful elections and constitutional reforms. The

deteriorating security situation, however, have affected U.S. policy even in this context, especially after the terrorist attacks to the U.S. embassy in 2012. While continuing to support the transition, as for other countries the focus of the Obama administration has partly shifted to the support of economic opportunity and good governance, with investment in civil society and democracy promotion being seen as only elements of a broader engagement prioritising security concerns and economic levers of political change.

Despite calls for renewed support to a human rights and civil society agenda, including with powerful presidential addresses at the UN General Assembly in 2013 and the Clinton Global Initiative in 2014, the Obama administration seems to have adjusted U.S. policy to the new, less favourable environment. Among most notable developments has been the restructuring of MEPI. Its offices moved from Tunisia to Morocco, the flagship of the Bush's Freedom Agenda has been incorporated into the foreign aid bureaucracy that also covers security assistance. In the process, the initiative has lost important elements of that autonomy that had made it one of the most interesting and innovative instruments of U.S. democracy assistance. MEPI is no longer headed by a political appointee from the democracy promotion community and has displayed growing restraint in funding NGOs in the region which have not obtained official authorization from the host governments. MEPI's "retrenchment" is both a direct outcome of a more prudent U.S. diplomacy which wants to avoid incidents that could further undermine already tense bilateral relations with U.S. partners and reflects the objective constraints of the new regional environment, which looks increasingly inhospitable for reform. Taken as a whole, in fact, almost five years after the start of the Arab Awakening the region can hardly be said to be moving towards a democratic future. As the attention has shifted to counterterrorism and crisis management, the Obama administration has declared the need for strategic patience and persistence in the area of democracy promotion. As the 2015 National Security Strategy argues at length,

Defending democracy and human rights is related to every enduring national interest. It aligns us with the aspirations of ordinary people throughout the world ... Our closest allies in these efforts will be, as they always have, other democratic states. But, even where our strategic interests require us to engage governments that do not share all our values, we will continue to speak out clearly for human rights and human dignity in our public and private diplomacy. Any support we might provide will be balanced with an awareness of the costs of repressive policies for our own security interests and the democratic values by which we live. Because our human rights advocacy will be most effective when we work in concert with a wide range of partners, we are building coalitions with civil society, religious leaders, businesses, other governments, and international organizations.

What this statement masks, however, is the extent in which the Obama administration has come to rely on non-democratic allies in the MENA region, as the U.S. has moved back towards the old approach of pursuing stability at the expense of political change first' strategy, a questionable stance which risks divorcing security from addressing the underlying conditions, among which the lack of political freedom and accountable governments is certainly one. The end result is in many ways reminiscent of President Bush's Global War on Terror. Indeed, on September 10, 2014, President Obama made an announcement that the U.S. will form an international coalition that will "degrade and destroy" the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Expressed in terms of a counter-terrorism strategy, the U.S. asserted the necessity for airstrikes, the need to support opposition movements inside Syria and Iraq, humanitarian assistance, and the use of broader preventative counter-terrorism instruments. This remarkably rushed announcement came just two weeks after the President publically declared that the U.S. did not have a strategy for the Middle East or for dealing with the Islamic State in place.

Nevertheless, it is clear that dealing with the Islamic State has now supplanted concerns with dealing with the social, economic and political grievances fueling alienation and radicalization across the region. As such, the doctrine of strategic patience looks conspicuously similar to the Freedom Agenda after 2006. Nods are made acknowledging the importance of democracy in the region, but a cautious approach is put forward that is reliant on long term through largely economic programs. This is problematic, as attempting to deal with the regions collapsing security architecture without addressing the wider regional context, which favors restricted civil societies, well-established authoritarian elites, poorly administered bureaucracies, and fractured and divergent identities fitting within mismatching state boundaries, is indicative of the Obama administration's attempts to treat the *symptoms* of the current regional crisis rather than the *cause*. Moreover, forming a coalition that includes some of the region's most authoritarian states will surely mean that the U.S. turns a blind eye to their contribution to the current climate and their human rights violations carried out in the name of domestic "wars on terror". In attempting to deal with the Islamic State, the U.S. needs regional partners and allies but doing so in a manner that seeks to maintain the regional status quo and ignores the causes of political upheaval across the region will lead to further alienation, sectarian divide and radicalization. Hastily organizing Counter Violent Extremism conferences at the White House is unlikely to address these concerns, and does little by way of genuinely creating again the conditions for a policy shift capable of reviving democratic aspirations in these challenging times.

Tables Overview:

Table 1: MEPI Pillars, Objectives and Focus

Table 2: Requested and Actual MEPI Funding FY2002- FY2015 separated by administration budget requests

Table 3: Status of US-MEFTA Efforts as of January 2009

Table 4: Areas addressed by the Freedom Agenda

Tables:

Table 1: MEPI Pillars, Objectives and Focus (Compiled from MEPI 2008)

Pillar	Objective	Focus
Political Pillar	To develop institutions and processes that are essential to active citizenries and accountable, representative governments. Programmes bring NGOs, governments and citizens together to push the boundaries of change.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Elections and Political Process.▪ Civil Society and Reform Advocacy.▪ Media.▪ Rule of Law.
Economic Pillar	Focusing on region wide economic and employment growth driven by private sector expansion and entrepreneurship.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Investment.▪ Entrepreneurship.▪ Trade/Transparency.
Education Pillar	To support education systems that enable all people, especially girls, to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in today's economy and improve the quality of their lives and those of their families.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Access.▪ Quality.▪ Skills Development.
Women's Pillar	To support local NGOs and Women reformers in the MENA in their effort to achieve full participation in society. This pillar focuses on addressing cultural, legal, regulatory, economic and political barriers that women encounter in their daily lives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Women and the Law.▪ Women in Democracy.▪ Women's rights.▪ Women's economic empowerment.

Table 2: Requested and Actual MEPI Funding FY2002- FY2015 separated by administration budget requests *Figures are in US \$ Millions*

Financial Year	Requested	Actual	Cumulative Actual Total
G.W. Bush Administration			
FY2002	---	29	---
FY2003	---	90	119
FY2004	145	89.5	208.5
FY2005	150	74.4	282.9
FY2006	120	114.4	397.3
FY2007	120	50.8	448.1
FY2008	75	49.6	497.7
FY2009	87	50	547.7
G.W. Bush administration totals	697	547.7	
Obama Administration			
FY2010	86	65	612.7
FY2011	86	80	692.7
FY2012	70	70	762.7
FY2013	65	65	827.7
FY2014	75	75	902.7
FY2015	70	---	
Obama Administration Totals	452	355	

Table 3: Status of US-MEFTA Efforts as of January 2009 (Updated from USTR 2006)*Note: The Palestinian Authority Participates in the US-Israel FTA.*

Country	FTA	TIFA	BIT	WTO	GSP
Israel	√	√	√	√	Not Eligible
Jordan	√	√	√	√	√
Morocco	√	√	√	√	√
Bahrain	√	√	√	√	Not Eligible
Egypt	Suspended Negotiation January 2006	√	√	√	√
Lebanon		√		Negotiating Accession	√
Algeria		√		Negotiating Accession	√
Tunisia		√	√	√	√
Saudi Arabia		√		√	Not Eligible
Oman	√	√		√	√
Kuwait		√		√	Not Eligible
UAE	Suspended Negotiation March 2007	√		√	Not Eligible
Yemen		√		Negotiating Accession	√
Qatar		√		√	Not Eligible
Syria					Not Eligible
Iraq		√		Negotiating Accession	√
Libya				Negotiating Accession	Not Eligible
Iran				Negotiating Accession	Not Eligible

Table 4: Areas addressed by the Freedom Agenda (Adapted from Wittes and Yerkes 2006a)

Program	Political Reform	Economic Reform	Educational Reform	Women's Empowerment
G.W. Bush administration Initiatives				
Middle East Free Trade Area	✓	✓		
Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative	✓	✓	✓	
Democracy Assistance Programs (MEPI)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Obama administration Initiatives				
MENA-TIP	✓	✓		
D/MET	✓	✓	✓	✓
Deauville Partnership	✓	✓		

✓ =Core Program focus.

✓ =Conceptual commitment no-programing.

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