

The Dilemma of U.S. Democracy and Human Rights Promotion in the Middle East



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As the Biden administration attempts to promote democracy and human rights in the Middle East, it will confront the deep-seated belief among Arabs that U.S. policies are unfair to their central causes and biased in favor of the ruling elite of their countries.

May 27, 2021 عربي

The United States suffers from a [fundamental problem](#) in its attempts to promote democratization in the Middle East. Unwavering U.S. support to Israel significantly accentuates its unfavorable image among an Arab public that is still recuperating from the atrocities of the recent Israeli attack on Gaza. President Biden's plan to promote democracy and support human rights in the Middle East will face longstanding concerns, serious doubts, and perhaps total rejection from pro-democracy activists and human rights defenders across the region.

The Biden administration's plans to support democracy and human rights in the Middle East are well underway according to a spokesperson of the United States National Security Council,¹ who said that the United States has begun to strongly encourage democratic reform in the Middle East through communication to the public regarding human rights violations and abuses of the rule of law. For example, the United States was among signatories of the [joint statement issued by members of the UN Human Rights Council](#), which called on Egypt to improve its human rights policies and procedures. The Biden administration has also expressed deep concern regarding human rights conditions in Iraq and has called on all Iraqi forces to respect relevant provisions of international law. According to the official, the Biden administration does not yet have a comprehensive plan regarding all human rights issues in the region, but it strives to evaluate the situation of each country independently.

The U.S. attempt to revive discourse on democratization raises [questions regarding values and standards](#) and how they will be balanced against long-standing strategic interests in relations with Arab governments. The United States faces two problems regarding the credibility of its proposal to promote democracy in the region: its policies on regional issues, such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and its bias in favor of ruling elites.

NEW ADMINISTRATION, DIFFERENT POLICIES?

The cynicism many Arabs have regarding U.S. policies toward the Middle East [clouded the cautious optimism](#) that some expressed upon Biden's electoral victory. This cynicism has unfortunately been confirmed by the strident U.S. defense of Israel and its "right to defend itself" to the extent of [blocking a UN Security Council statement](#) calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, where Israeli use of excessive force led to the [death of 230 civilians](#).

Though several Arab states have signed normalization agreements with Israel, the United Arab Emirates being a case in point, an overwhelming majority of the Arab public [disapproves](#) of this form of diplomatic recognition. For many Arabs, these normalization agreements are not only seemingly in opposition to the Palestinian cause, but they also undermine one of the key incentives for Israel to end its occupation of Palestine. Additionally, the agreements allow Israel to continue building settlements that violate Palestinian rights.

The [2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index](#), which examined public opinion regarding attitudes towards the Palestine issue across 13 Arab countries, showed that 88 percent of Arabs disapprove of recognition of Israel by their home countries, whereas only 6 percent support it. Half of those who supported recognition of Israel responded that it should be conditioned on the establishment of a free and independent Palestinian state. According to the survey, 66 percent of the Arab public considers Israel and the United States (a combined total) the two countries that pose the largest threat to security in the Arab world. Eighty nine percent of Arabs believe that Israel alone poses the greatest threat to the security and stability of the region.

Gulf public opinion, [as surveyed in the Arab Opinion Index](#), had one of the highest percentages of respondents who considered the Palestinian cause as an issue for all Arabs, despite the recent push for normalization with Israel in the region. When it came to the fight against terrorism, 17 percent of surveyed Arabs suggested that resolving the Palestinian cause would be the number one solution for combating terrorism in the region, while 15 percent suggested ending foreign intervention and 12 percent said that supporting democracy would help in fighting terrorism in the region. When asked to examine specific U.S. foreign policy areas, the vast majority of Arabs had a negative outlook on the U.S. policies towards Palestine (81 percent), Syria (77 percent), Yemen (74 percent), and Libya (70 percent).

The Biden administration would be remiss to disregard these numbers when evaluating plans to promote democracy in the region. The statistics demonstrated the degree to which Arabs doubt the United States' reliability as a credible and fair partner who is determined to take a more balanced position in the region.

FAILURE IN THE FIRST HUMAN RIGHTS TEST

President Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken have repeatedly stressed that advancing democratic norms and fundamental human rights "will be at the center of U.S. foreign policy" in all the countries of the Middle East, including the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. According to the administration's official statement, the United States encourages all of its partners to make every effort to improve the way they treat their citizens and has taken steps to investigate and address human rights violations committed by Saudi Arabia. The investigation inspected both internal and external violations and the administration expressed concern over the arrests and ill-treatment of human rights advocates in the Kingdom, especially women activists.

In a statement released on February 26, 2021, titled "[Accountability for the Murder of Jamal Khashoggi](#)," Blinken announced a visa restriction policy named after the prominent Saudi journalist and dissident. The ban targeted 76 Saudi citizens believed to have been directly involved in serious counter dissident activities or suspected of involvement in the murder of Khashoggi.

President Biden, [in a phone conversation with King Salman of Saudi Arabia](#), affirmed "the importance the United States places on universal human rights and rule of law" and "noted positively" the release of several Saudi activists, including prominent Saudi women's rights activist, Loujain al-Hathloul. [The conversation](#) seemingly closed the discussion of the murder of Khashoggi between the two governments, as no public reference has been made to the role of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in this flagrant violation of human rights. Even the U.S. State Department's [human rights report](#), despite its strong and comprehensive coverage of the violations in Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries, [did not name Bin Salman](#) in conjunction with the "killing of Khashoggi."

The Biden administration's decision to forgo direct sanctions on the Crown Prince reinforces the belief that many Arabs have that the United States has no scruples in granting immunity to perpetrators and royal families. [The United States](#) continues to fail the test of impartiality when it comes to its strategic partners in the region.

ARAB SPRING REVOLUTIONS AND DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

The 2011 Arab Spring protesters aspired to create more democratic societies where people's voices were heard, an aspiration still pursued by societies where human rights activists who question the U.S. plan to support democratization and human rights in the Middle East and believe that the real test for Washington comes when this ideal clashes with American interests in the region.

In the [2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index](#), 89 percent of the surveyed participants viewed democracy positively. An average of 39 percent defined democracy as safeguarding citizens' political and civil liberties, 20 percent viewed it as the guarantee of equality and justice for citizens, 12 percent affirmed the participation and institutional aspect of a democratic system (circulation of power, separation, and control between authorities), and the majority rejected the statement that their society is not prepared to practice democracy.

Although 79 percent of Arab public opinion considers a democratic system to be the most appropriate for their countries, the ruling elite in many Arab countries still oppress, imprison, and exile those who demand it. Autocratic regimes continue to justify their repressive practices; however, with the idea that Arab peoples are not yet ready to practice democracy, pointing to the negative repercussions of the Arab Spring in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. In assessing citizens' views on the 2011 Arab uprising, however, 58 percent consider the uprisings to have been positive. This percentage from the 2019-2020 poll is the highest ever since the question was first included in the 2012-2013 survey.

Furthermore, 51 percent of Arab citizens stated that they would accept an electoral victory that resulted in a rise to power of a political party with which they disagreed, while 43 percent stated that they would not. These statistics clearly show that the majority of Arab people support democracy and that they might even encourage and support an American plan to promote democracy as a solid political base for their governments.

If the Biden administration is serious about pushing this support, it must adopt a new strategy that does not rely solely on the support of long-term autocratic allies. The United States should attempt to create a strong new network of allies, who represent civil society and advocate for individual and public freedoms under the rule of law. The time has passed for paying lip service to democratic ideals and human rights in the Middle East; signing joint statements and expressing concerns over human rights violations is no longer good enough. It is time for this administration to review its positions and policies on key Arab issues and conflicts, and work to build new strategic partnerships that are not limited to ruling elites and royal families.

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NOTE

¹ Author interview with a member of the National Security Council staff on May 5, 2021

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