As popular demonstrations swept across the Arab world in 2011, many U.S. policymakers and analysts were hopeful that the movements would usher in a new era for the region. That May, President Barack Obama described the uprisings as “a historic opportunity” for the United States “to pursue the world as it should be.” Secretary of State Hillary Clinton echoed these comments, expressing confidence that the transformations would allow Washington to advance “security, stability, peace, and democracy” in the Middle East. Not to be outdone, the Republican Party’s 2012 platform trumpeted “the historic nature of the events of the past two years—the Arab Spring—that have unleashed democratic movements leading to the overthrow of dictators who have been menaces to global security for decades.” Some saw the changes as heralding a long-awaited end to the Middle East’s immunity to previous waves of global democratization; others proclaimed that al Qaeda and other radicals had finally lost the war of ideas.

The initial results of the tumult were indeed inspiring. Broad-based uprisings removed Tunisia’s Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak, and Libya’s Muammar al-Qaddafi from power. Since the toppling of these dictators, all three countries have conducted elections that international observers deemed competitive and fair, and millions of people across the region can now freely express their political opinions.

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The prospects for further democratization, however, have dimmed. Most countries in the Arab world have not jumped political tracks, and those that did begin to liberalize are now struggling to maintain order, lock in their gains, and continue moving forward. The region’s economic growth has been sluggish—which is particularly worrisome, since according to a 2012 Pew Research Center poll, majorities in several countries there (including Jordan and Tunisia) value a strong economy more than a democratic government. And even after all the changes, the region comprising the Middle East and North Africa remains the least free in the world, with Freedom House estimating that 72 percent of the countries and 85 percent of the people there still lack basic political rights and civil liberties.

In the wake of the uprisings, many local regimes remain weak and unable to establish law and order. Syria has descended into a bloody civil war along sectarian lines. Iraq and Yemen, already unstable beforehand, remain deeply fractured and violent. Libya’s fragile central government has failed to disarm the warlords and militias that control many of the country’s rural areas. Even in Egypt, the poster child for regional political reform, the Muslim Brotherhood–led government has attempted to solidify its control and silence the media using tactics reminiscent of the Mubarak era. Meanwhile, as the riots that spread across the region in September illustrated, anti-American sentiment shows no signs of abating. Terrorism continues to be a major problem, too, with al Qaeda and its affiliates trying to fill the vacuums in Libya, Syria, and other unstable countries.

The demise of Middle Eastern authoritarianism may come eventually. But there is little reason to think that day is near, and even less reason to think that the United States can significantly increase its chances of happening. Any effort by Washington to bring democracy to the region will fail if local social and economic conditions are not ripe and if vested interests in the countries oppose political reforms. Indeed, outside powers such as the United States have historically had only a marginal impact, at best, on whether a country democratizes. Until another wave of local uprisings does succeed in transforming the region, U.S. policy should not be hamstrung by an overly narrow
focus on spreading democracy. The United States and its allies need to protect their vital strategic interests in the region—balancing against rogue states such as Iran, ensuring access to energy resources, and countering violent extremists. Achieving these goals will require working with some authoritarian governments and accepting the Arab world for what it is today.

WAVING OFF
In the 1970s and 1980s, what the political scientist Samuel Huntington called the “third wave” of global democratization led to breathtaking political changes in Latin America, parts of Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and eventually Eastern Europe. Freedom was on the march almost everywhere—except for the Middle East. The immunity of Arab regimes to democratization was so broad and seemingly so durable that it gave rise to a new literature, one seeking to explain not democratic change but authoritarian persistence. Some have argued that the Arab Spring has changed all this and that it is best understood as a delayed regional onset of the third wave or even the harbinger of a fourth. But that misreads events and offers undue optimism.

In Algeria, for example, the protest movement that began in December 2010 with the aim of overthrowing President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and installing a democratic system has sputtered. The government has cracked down on dissenters and appeased others with symbolic reforms. Even though the May 2012 parliamentary elections were derided by much of the population as a sham and the long-entrenched military government declared an emphatic victory, few Algerians took to the streets in protest. Similarly, in Jordan, King Abdullah kept protesters at bay with modest concessions, such as dismissing government ministers and expanding popular subsidies. Regardless of these superficial changes, the Hashemite monarchy remains firmly in control, and Jordanian security forces continue to crush domestic resistance, restrict freedom of expression, and prevent peaceful assembly.

In Saudi Arabia, the monarchy has kept a firm grip on power and has used its might to prop up neighboring autocratic regimes. In February 2011, Riyadh ordered tanks into Bahrain to help put down a popular uprising that Saudi and Bahraini leaders portrayed as sectarian agitation. What the Saudis and the other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council really feared, however, was the protesters’ demands
that Bahrain become a constitutional monarchy. The Gulf monarchies, as uncomfortable with the Arab Spring as they were with Arab nationalism half a century earlier, have once again taken up the mantle of counterrevolution. A telltale sign came in May 2011, when the GCC offered membership to the kingdoms of Jordan and Morocco, neither of which are located in the Gulf region. Coupled with the financing that the GCC provided to Egypt in order to gain leverage over its new government, these overtures demonstrated that the Arab monarchies intend to consolidate their power and spread their influence across the Middle East.

At the same time, the Arab countries that managed to topple their old regimes face great uncertainty. In Libya, for example, the July 2012 elections did indeed represent a remarkable achievement for a state still reeling from decades of dictatorial rule, especially given that fears of violence, fraud, or an Islamist landslide did not materialize. But storm clouds loom ahead. As in Iraq, the writing of a constitution in Libya will likely be hampered by divisions over the question of federal power between different parts of the country. And as the September killing of the U.S. ambassador and three other Americans in Benghazi demonstrated, the government is struggling to reestablish security and the rule of law. The bureaucracy is weak; well-armed militias control much of the countryside; and Salafi groups have attacked Sufi shrines across the country, digging up graves and destroying mosques and libraries. Human rights abuses continue, as thousands of prisoners taken during the struggle to oust Qaddafi remain in illegal detention facilities, where they face mistreatment, torture, and even extrajudicial killings. And tens of thousands of displaced people, many of whom were forced out of their homes, languish in refugee camps around the country.

Yemen is also a mess. Following several bloody crackdowns on the country’s protest movement throughout 2011, President Ali Abdullah Saleh eventually agreed in November of that year to transfer power to his vice president, Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi. But in the subsequent presidential election, Hadi was the only candidate on the ballot. His weak government is now grappling with a Shiite rebellion in the north, a secessionist movement and an al Qaeda insurgency in the south,
and powerful militias and tribes that control substantial swaths of territory. All signs indicate that violence will persist and the economy will remain in the doldrums.

Egypt recently held the first competitive presidential election in its history, but the country does not have an easy path to stability and prosperity. President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood has wrested substantial political and military control from the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. Like Mubarak before him, he has tried to vest himself with enormous power; he currently holds significant executive, legislative, and judicial authority, and he has attempted to silence the media. Yet the generals continue to exercise influence through the National Defense Council, and secular liberals are challenging Morsi’s consolidation of power in the courts. And one of the strongest political challenges to the Brotherhood comes not from liberals but from al Nour, a Salafi party that supports strict implementation of sharia. Political instability and a difficult period of civil-military relations will continue to weigh heavily on the economy, which has been crippled by a lack of foreign investment, disruptions in manufacturing, and a decline in tourism.
Seth G. Jones

Tunisia has emerged as one of the few success stories of the region’s upheaval. It has evolved from an authoritarian state to an electoral democracy whose new leaders have supported moderation, civil liberties, and the rule of law. The press is vibrant, civil society has blossomed, and the leadership appears committed to tackling corruption. Although Tunisia faces some of the same problems as its neighbors, such as a weak state and a challenge from radical Salafists, at least for now, the country is moving in the right direction. Unfortunately, the futures of few other countries in the region look as promising.

**IT’S GOOD TO BE THE KING**

Scholars have long puzzled over the hurdles to democracy in the Middle East, particularly given the rapid expansion of freedom elsewhere in the world. Classical modernization theory holds that democracy will follow when a society reaches a certain level of economic development. But even in the wealthiest Arab countries, democracy has not yet materialized. Another common but false assumption is that doing away with a dictatorship necessarily leads to freedom. Yet as Huntington and others have pointed out, when authoritarian regimes fall, they sometimes give way to other authoritarian regimes rather than to liberal ones. Despite the developments of the last two years, certain structural factors will continue to block the spread of democracy in the Middle East.

Some governments in the region, especially in the Gulf, derive the majority of their revenue from energy exports and foreign aid. Relying heavily on such income streams allows these regimes to avoid taxing their populations significantly, removing a central source of popular demand for political participation. The American colonists insisted on “no taxation without representation.” Think of this as the converse principle: no representation without taxation.

Energy wealth also allows autocrats to fund their security forces lavishly and buy the loyalty of key domestic constituencies. In March 2011, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia blunted calls for reform by announcing a staggering $130 billion benefits package that improved wages and job opportunities for a population of less than 30 million. The benefits mostly went to the young and the poor, the groups that had been at the forefront of the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia. Riyadh’s control of an official clerical establishment proved similarly instrumental in delegitimizing protests, as the Saudi grand mufti—the country’s chief Sunni religious leader—issued a fatwa against demonstrations and dissent.
The Mirage of the Arab Spring

The external environment, furthermore, will not be particularly helpful in spurring further political change. In the late 1980s, Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev, facing grim economic problems at home, decided to curb Soviet support for communist regimes in Eastern Europe—a move that sounded the death knell of authoritarianism there. The former Soviet satellite states promptly turned to Western Europe and the United States, which supported their political liberalization and welcomed the region into democratic institutions such as the European Union and NATO. But today, the Saudi regime—the richest and strongest authoritarian power in the region—is trying to fight reforms and has shown that it is more than willing to dispense cash to that end. And so even though many Arab autocrats now face unprecedented unrest at home, they still possess the ample financial resources that have kept their regimes afloat for so long.

The region's monarchies, finally, have been particularly adept at resisting democratic change. Kingdoms such as Jordan, Morocco, and Oman, for example, do not enjoy large per capita oil revenues, but their traditional regimes have nonetheless managed to remain in power while ceding some control to elected parliaments. Where the ruler retains a special bond with the people, either by claiming descent from the Prophet Muhammad (as in Morocco) or by serving as a unifying force for different ethnic groups in the country (as in Jordan), protesters have been more likely to accept legislative change and have not demanded a wholesale abandonment of the monarchy.

In January 2011, for example, Jordanian protesters began to complain about corruption, rising prices, rampant poverty, and high unemployment. In response, King Abdullah replaced his prime minister and formed two commissions to study possible electoral reforms and constitutional amendments. In September, the king approved amendments to create a more independent judiciary and establish a constitutional court and an independent electoral commission to oversee the next municipal and parliamentary elections. There have been occasional violent demonstrations, such as in late 2012, when protesters complained about rising gas prices. But so far, the government's limited concessions have managed to head off most instability, leaving Abdullah in control.

HURRY UP AND WAIT
Washington should not base its policy toward the greater Middle East on the assumption that the region is democratizing quickly or sustainably. The United States and other Western countries should encourage liberal reforms, support civil society, and provide technical
assistance in improving countries’ constitutions and financial systems. But the perceived promise of the Arab uprisings should not cause the United States to overlook its main strategic priorities in the region. Like it or not, the United States counts among its allies a number of authoritarian Arab countries, and they are essential partners in protecting its interests. The normative hope that liberal democracy may flourish in the future must be balanced by the need to work with governments and societies as they exist today.

A central goal remains counterbalancing Iran—not only preventing it from acquiring nuclear weapons but also checking its long-term regional ambitions. Iran views the United States as its main ideological and geopolitical enemy, and it is seeking to become the preeminent power in the Middle East and to promote its revolutionary ideology. Tehran has lent support to a number of U.S. adversaries and organizations that challenge U.S. interests, including Shiite groups in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Palestinian terrorist groups, Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria, and the Venezuelan government under Hugo Chávez. Even though many of the countries that the United States will rely on to help counter Iran, including Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, are not democratic, their cooperation is too important for Washington to forsake.

Another crucial goal is maintaining the free flow of energy resources at reasonable prices. The United States imports about 23 percent of its crude oil and related products from the Arab world, particularly from Saudi Arabia (1.2 million barrels per day in August 2012), Iraq (550,000 barrels), Algeria (303,000 barrels), and Kuwait (301,000 barrels). Several of these countries are—not coincidentally given their immense oil wealth—undemocratic. This means that for the foreseeable future, the United States must continue to work with authoritarian states to preserve its energy security.

Finally, the United States needs to work with nondemocratic countries on fighting terrorism. Although al Qaeda has been weakened along the Afghan-Pakistani border, it has attempted to compensate for this by expanding its influence elsewhere and establishing relationships with local Sunni groups. In Yemen, for example, the local al Qaeda affiliate has exploited the weakness of the government and established a foothold in several provinces along the Gulf of Aden, triggering alarm in Saudi Arabia. With U.S. troops gone, al Qaeda in Iraq increased its attacks to nearly 30 per month in 2012, a 50 percent jump from the previous two years and a major cause of concern in Jordan. Militants from Iraq have
also crept across the border into Syria, where they have orchestrated dozens of car bomb and suicide attacks against the Assad regime.

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb has dispatched fighters into Mali, Tunisia, and other countries, hoping to take advantage of the political vacuums in North Africa. The al Qaeda affiliate al Shabab retains a foothold in parts of southern Somalia. And al Qaeda has fostered ties with other groups in the region, including Boko Haram in Nigeria, Ansar al-Sharia in Libya, and a jihadist network in Egypt led by Muhammad Jamal Abu Ahmad. Authoritarian governments such as those in Jordan and Saudi Arabia have been important allies in the fight against radical Islamist terrorism in the region, and keeping such cooperation intact is imperative.

In fact, the cold reality is that some democratic governments in the Arab world would almost certainly be more hostile to the United States than their authoritarian predecessors, because they would be more responsive to the populations of their countries, which are largely anti-American. According to a 2012 Pew Research poll, the United States’ image in several countries in the Muslim world has deteriorated sharply over the past several years. Before the Arab uprisings, for example, 27 percent of Egyptians and 25 percent of Jordanians polled had favorable attitudes toward the United States. By 2012, those numbers had dropped to 19 percent and 12 percent, respectively. The September 2012 anti-American demonstrations in the region, which spread from Egypt and Libya throughout the Middle East, provided yet another reminder that anti-American and anti-Western sentiments still exist in the Muslim world.

The uprisings of the last two years have represented a significant challenge to authoritarian rule in the Arab world. But structural conditions appear to be preventing broader political liberalization in the region, and war, corruption, and economic stagnation could undermine further progress. Although the United States can take some steps to support democratization in the long run, it cannot force change. Middle Eastern autocrats may eventually fall, and the spread of liberal democracy would be welcomed by most Americans, even if it would carry certain risks. Yet until such changes occur because of the labor of Arabs themselves, U.S. policy toward the Middle East should focus on what is attainable. As former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld might put it, Washington should conduct its foreign policy with the Arab world it has, not the Arab world it might want or wish to have at a later time.