



Challenges Ahead in the Middle East

by A. Lawrence Chickering

Two decades ago, flying with a friend over Cairo's City of the Dead, Hosni Mubarak pointed to the forest of TV antennas below and remarked, "This is why I no longer control Egypt as I once did."

Although the United States knew the events were coming that have swept through the Middle East, it was utterly unprepared for them. These events, protesting dictatorships and promoting democracy in a number of countries, will disturb the region for as long as it takes to complete the revolution and transition to stable democracies. If U.S. policy is to support this transition and promote change, it must consider differences in internal conditions leading up to the unrest within each country. But underneath the differences are much deeper social and cultural similarities that represent the real challenge. Unfortunately, these similarities are now being largely ignored.

Mainstream comment on the recent unrest denies that any common social or political force is driving the unrest and only emphasizes the differences among the countries where the unrest is strongest (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and other countries).¹ They emphasize different elements ranging from the role of the army, the nature of the autocratic governments, the state of the education system, the role of women, and a blizzard of other differences.

There is, however, a common force driving unrest that is spreading across the region. It is the desire of tribal people for freedom. The freedom they seek has many components: freedom to abandon lives rigidly defined by traditional roles, freedom to participate actively in their own economic and social progress, freedom from dictators and freedom to participate actively in civic life. In essence, it is the desire to be free to leave the passive role-bound nature of traditional tribal life and choose an active role in modern life.

If people are to be free to make such a change in their lives, they must embrace a new set of values: social trust, active citizenship, individual empowerment, self-governance, and a sense of equality. These values are crucial to any healthy and stable transition to democracy. Without them there will be increasing unrest and instability throughout the region.

Social Trust as the Central Democratic Value

The first step is to promote social trust. Trust is the "mother's milk" of all democracies. Increasing trust will tend to open the political system to wider circles of participation. It will bring people together and facilitate collective action. Trust leads to other basic values, including empowerment and citizenship; and these, in turn, lead to the modern democratic values of freedom and equality.

¹ See, e.g., Lisa Anderson, "Demystifying the Arab Spring," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2011.

When people work together for the public good, they become citizens capable of expanding trust to groups further away, including governments. They feel, and truly become, empowered. Following this logic, it should become possible to develop a network of self-governing civil society organizations, which are the natural institutional form for integrating peoples in these societies into emerging democracies.

Under all recent Presidents, the U.S. has tried to promote objective, modern democratic values like freedom, equality, and voting without first addressing these underlying subjective, cultural challenges of trust, empowerment, and citizenship. To understand the importance of social development to modern democracies, it would be useful to recall the role that social development played in promoting the the social and psychological foundation for Western democracies.

If social trust is the core value of modern societies, trust depends on development of an active, individualistic concept of self, a self able to reach beyond family and tribe—or gender—to individuals. Expanding beyond the passive self happens with communication across loyalties, and the heart of social development is to institutionalize such communication.

Promoting trust is initially an intimate, personal experience, and promoting trust can only be encouraged (therefore) in local and personal experiences. This is why governments cannot do it—why civil society organizations (CSOs) need to carry the principal burden of promoting it. This also explains why current foreign policy and institutions, focusing entirely on states, are struggling as they try to promote change in tribal societies.

The most urgent priority for change is to open space in the debate about policy to begin experimenting with civil society initiatives promoting trust. Such experimentation needs to be done by indigenous CSOs, guided by international experiences. Relying on indigenous CSOs will represent a very substantial challenge for us because it will require us to trust them.

It is hard to think how foreign policy, which has in the past been all about governments, must now reach out to civil society organizations and develop new policies toward societies and non-state actors. But that is precisely what needs to happen. Without new policies promoting social development as a high priority for policy, many countries in the region will become “failed states”. This frightening prospect will go on for years, if not decades and longer.

An early warning of the problems of stability in transition to democracies appeared at the end of February 2011, when renewed unrest in Tunisia led to the resignation of the newly-installed Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi, who replaced the deposed dictator President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Responding to the renewed unrest, Prime Minister Ghannouchi said: “I am not ready to be the person who takes decisions that would wind up causing casualties.” With the resignation of such a man, it is reasonable to wonder what sources of civil order will govern Tunisia’s transition to democracy.

The need is to build civil society institutions that will play active roles, building trust and citizenship, while mediating between individuals and the state in these countries. This social development took centuries in the West before democratic institutions and values emerged in the eighteenth century. A combination of well-designed policies and innovative uses of technology should be able to promote significant change in a much shorter period.

Very large issues arise in relation to promoting social development. Some of them have to do with what to do—how to begin the process. Others have to do with overcoming political

challenges to implementing new policies and creating new institutions to address them. These challenges are not limited to those societies and the power relationships that currently exist in them. The challenges are also about us, philosophically, institutionally, and operationally.

The Philosophical Challenge. This requires changing our habits of thought away from the mechanistic instinct to see all problems as objective and solvable by governments to acknowledging the subjective challenges embodied in culture, which need to be addressed by civil society initiatives, acting initially at the local level. Embracing new policies that act in local communities will require significant changes in how we think about foreign policy, which currently focuses entirely on governments and states. Addressing subjective cultural issues will require moving away from the mechanistic categories of law and economics and moving toward non-mechanistic, organic modes of person engagement. This shift will require moving away from false mechanistic certainty to uncertain, spiritual, and human forms of relationship and understanding.

A related challenge is how to shift from thinking that all problems need to be solved by us to thinking that most problems in developing countries need to be solved by them. (While everybody talks about solutions coming from them rather than from us, in the real world it is all about us, even in the most “progressive” quarters of the debate about policy.)

The Institutional Challenges. The first challenge here is how to open space in foreign policy dialogue and debate to include new actors who both think about societies and also have practical experience working in them. This is a huge challenge because the financial markets that currently dominate development programs are dominated very largely by the same foreign policy community that focuses on development in terms of mechanistic programs for helping rather than empowering people. While helping is needed in disaster relief, it is not what is needed in a new policy focused on promoting trust, empowerment, and citizenship.

Opening the debate on foreign policy to include these issues is important to alter and expand the perspective of the foreign policy community, which tends to regard the populace of a country as consumers of services, but otherwise a passive, irrelevant force. Recent events in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and other countries show in high relief how mistaken and limited this perspective can be.

The Operational Challenges. One challenge is how to open spaces in foreign policy institutions (which are currently focused only on states) so they can design and implement new models of civil society intervention toward societies. A second challenge is explicitly political: how to implement new policies that attempt to promote change in the cultures of other countries without producing powerful backlashes that destroy the initiatives before they can even begin.

A final, more general challenge has to do with the question of how any program or initiative directed toward the populace of a country—as opposed to the government—can possibly operate at scales sufficient to be truly strategic.

Educate Girls Globally (EGG): Promoting Change in Traditional Cultures

If we identify and analyze civil society initiatives that have successfully promoted social change throughout the world, we will find that important pieces of the democratization puzzle have already been solved. For example, Educate Girls Globally (EGG), which has developed a highly successful program for promoting girls’ education by reforming government schools in

the very traditional and tribal state of Rajasthan in India, reveals important pieces in how to meet the challenges we face. After experimenting with the issue for more than a decade, EGG has demonstrated:

- That the people of even the most traditional and tribal cultures can evolve in a very short time from passive, fatalistic followers of habit to active participants in promoting economic, social, and political progress;
- That very traditional, tribal people can shift from absolute indifference to girls' education to active advocacy of it;
- That such a program can work inside government institutions without confronting political opposition either from local communities or from the government; and
- That it can operate at high scales and low costs, which are truly strategic.

In short, EGG has developed various key elements of a new, strategic policy that can be effective in promoting social development, potentially addressing a variety of different challenges.²

Educated women are the principal agents of social change in developing countries. For issues including health, population control, education, and peace, educating mothers is the most powerful available catalyst of change and progress. Despite progress in many countries, the education of girls and empowerment of women has lagged badly, especially in the Muslim countries from Pakistan to Somalia, and in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Powerful models exist for educating girls, even in the most “difficult” cultures—in the most fundamentalist Islamic cultures in northwest Pakistan and Upper Egypt, for example. In such places, one might think no girls would be attending school, but every girl is. The successes, however, tend to reach only small populations.

Educate Girls Globally (EGG) has discovered several key components for scaling reform of education, especially for girls. The key is transferring the lessons of successful CSO pilot projects into operating government schools. Working in two states of India, EGG has done just that: created a scalable and sustainable model that empowers and animates communities, teachers, girls, and even government bureaucrats to reform schools and make them work for girls. The marginal cost is insignificant. When the program is operating at large scales, the cost is less than \$2.00 per child per year for the two-year program.

The key to EGG's success is empowerment through ownership. Schools that are run bureaucratically, like government schools, fail because no one owns them: not the teachers, nor parents and communities, certainly not the children, nor even the bureaucrats. Without ownership—the sense of authority that gives people stakes in institutions—people feel little commitment because they have no stake. EGG's program success is based on empowering all to work together to improve the schools. It mobilizes underutilized resources in the form of parents, communities, teachers, government officials, and even girls to bring girls who have dropped out back into school and to improve school quality.

² Educate Girls Globally (EGG) works in partnership with affiliates in individual countries. In India, the affiliate is Educate Girls (EG). EGG's model has won four awards for innovation (available on request). The most complete evaluation is the one completed for expansion to 500 schools in Pali District. Data are now available from the expansion to every school in Pali District or 2,342 schools serving 590,000 children, 263,000 of them girls. A report is now being written on those data. For the most complete report, currently available, see *Evaluation in 500 Schools in Pali District, Rajasthan, 2010*; Barbara Herz, Memorandum on Evaluation in 500 Schools in Pali District.

EGG offers no financial rewards or incentives. Its only currency is empowerment. Rigorous evaluation of this model shows powerful impacts in enrollment, attendance, school and community improvements, learning, and personal qualities, including self-esteem, self-assertiveness, and leadership.³ After working in 500 schools, serving more than 70,000 children over two years, communities supporting 178 schools built clean water facilities. EGG provided no funding for this improvement; the communities built them on their own.

EGG expanded to nearly 2,342 schools in 2010 and has now expanded again this year to about 4,500 schools, serving 590,000 children, 263,000 of them girls. This amounts to every school in two whole districts—without opposition or conflict in any single school. The government of Rajasthan is now financing more than 30 percent of this work. EGG is planning to expand to two new districts in 2011, doubling its presence.

Building trust inside schools or inside communities is a beginning. Promoting and expanding trust then needs to reach out to other communities, building networks of engagement between communities. Then democratization strategies can evolve from the bottom up. This is true nation-building.

The Role of Outsiders

What is an “outsider’s” role in social development? How can one promote it, avoiding the perception that we are interfering, provoking opposition and backlash?

Perception is everything. If they support the reforms, and the reforms are seen to be “theirs”, not “ours”, there is no problem. Reform agendas become “theirs” when they take the lead in promoting change. Leadership can come from anywhere—from government or business or CSOs. It can even come from local communities, sharing powerful reform experiences. Choosing who initiates the policy discussion that might stimulate a movement for reform can be a function of information about successful experiences.

An outsider’s role needs to be limited to sharing world experiences dealing with the problem at issue (i.e., education reform). The choice of “messenger” can be very important. In choosing the messenger, it is important to be aware of the hierarchy of authority for influence. The weakest authority is the U.S. Government. When the USG is an active player, the conditions for establishing “their” ownership of the reform are weakest. Private U.S. institutions are better. Better still will be institutions from other developing countries, especially from countries close by. Arab countries are more apt to be influenced by other Arab countries than by countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Promoting Local Ownership

A starting point for promoting local ownership is to find and appoint as the “leader” a respected policy leader in a developing country. The International Center for Economic Growth (ICEG), founded in 1985, provides important clues about how to do this. They recruited as a leader Nicolas Ardito-Barletta, former President of Panama and a Ph.D. in economics, who was in personal contact with a network of U.S.-trained economists throughout Latin America. ICEG’s headquarters, therefore, was in Panama City for almost ten years, and the South-South dialogue it promoted, which included research grants to economists in different countries, played

³ Ibid.

a role in major reforms in more than fifty countries. Timing was important in that experience. Gorbachev came to power in the USSR in 1985; central planning was losing favor as a means of organizing economies, and governments everywhere were looking for ideas on how to use markets to promote development.

This model of influence depends on trust. We need to trust other peoples to take leadership for change so that the change can be “theirs” rather than “ours”. Often this will mean approaching the potential agents of influence, indigenous civil society organizations (CSOs), in culturally accepted ways that produce this result.

Every party involved in the Middle East—corporations, CSOs, and the U.S. Government—is apprehensive about uncertainty in many countries there. They have reason to be apprehensive because they did very little to help promote institutions of civil society that could promote democracy and reduce uncertainty.

There is still much to do—much that needs to be done. All major parties operating in these countries, both public and private, have important roles to play to reduce their own vulnerability and help promote a smooth transition. How can policies be designed to be about “them”—to be approved by them and especially owned by them?

Sketching an Action Program

The central message here is to create a vision of possibility for a transformed society in priority countries. There are two parts of what needs to be done.

First, create real, transformative experiences that will provide powerful visions of a different future. The EGG model provides a powerful, potential model to implement. Others, like it, need to be researched and experimented with. These projects should focus on increasing social trust, empowering people, and promoting citizenship. These projects, implemented by indigenous CSOs, will help integrate people into democratic institutions and values, and thus bring stability and order to the transition to it. These projects will provide real examples of possibility.

Second, develop a strategic communications program that will promote the strategic scale that can influence whole societies. This program would employ new social media to promote visions of possibility to mass audiences, based on real experiences and promoting strategic impact.

People in power will not oppose this initiative for two reasons: first, because it will operate organically from village to village, below the radar screen of the central government, as EGG’s program does; and second, because this organic change will provide no operational moment that will galvanize opposition. The organic change stimulated by this approach is radically different from the mechanistic changes in traditional public policy reform. Traditional policy reform, acting by commands from the center, focuses all change at a single moment: everything happens on Tuesday—the regulation is passed, an election happens, a legislative vote or judicial decision comes down. Sudden, mechanical change causes uncertainty, and since “people prefer a known evil to an unknown good,” these moments create powerful opportunities for opposition.

When people come together and work for change, the organic change that results creates no strategic moment for opposition.

Increasing trust, focusing primarily on people (different families, different tribes), also needs to engage people with government officials. This will tend to open and encourage citizens' participation in the political system. Such increasing participation, moving through an increasingly open system, can provide role in promoting an organic path to full democracy.

Roles of Corporations, CSOs, and Government

All institutions, both public and private, have important roles to play in promoting stable transitions to democracy in Middle East countries. In the past, all energy in foreign and security policy focused on governments. One of the most important roles is to promote civil society initiatives that encourage social development.

The key is promoting social trust by bringing people together and institutionalizing communication across loyalties. Private institutions, both CSOs and corporations, need to do this in local venues, and powerful models, developed in different countries, show how to do it.⁴ By advertising their support for transformative programs and their employees' participation in them, these organizations will become "model citizens" in supporting strategic change.

Governments have the central role, working in concert with private profit and non-profit organizations. Strategic impact can be achieved by developing Country Strategic Plans that will create significant change in countries. An appropriate model is the "Country Strategic Plans" used by the Ford Foundation in its global operations when McGeorge Bundy was President.⁵ In these Plans, the idea was not just to "do good", but to plan for doing good strategically.

The Challenge of Capacity

The huge challenges we face, which, if anything, will grow in the future, raising questions about our capacity to address them. Technology will create perceptions of increasing economic, social, and political differences between societies. Technology will create increasingly destructive weapons for people enraged by those differences to strike back. Markets will accelerate the challenges—increasing economic differences, increasing perceptions of injustice, and accelerating the movement of weapons. The challenges explored here will only increase in the future.

Issues of capacity are both internal and external: how to promote a sense of "ownership" of these challenges so that every community members helps reform schools and every country helps solve international problems that do not respect national borders. That is the external problem. The internal problem is how to reform institutions—including governmental institutions—to promote internal cooperation between departments organized separately by function.

Problems of capacity arise at every level, from grass roots villages to nations to the global community. Many factors discourage participation from important, potential actors at every level, and dysfunctional structures discourage cooperation within them. To solve these problems

⁴ See A. Lawrence Chickering, Isobel Coleman, P. Edward Haley, and Emily Vargas-Baron, *Strategic Foreign Assistance: Civil Society in International Security*, 2006, especially chapter 4, which describes experiences in Northern Ireland, South Africa, and India. EGG's program, however, shows in great detail how to bring together a variety of different groups to promote common action.

⁵ *Ibid.*, especially chapter 6.

will require a) that everyone contributes, and b) that people work together to solve problems that cut across traditional, functional lines.

At every level, both international and local, mobilizing underutilized resources will hold a crucial key to solutions. This means increasing the countries contributing to solutions internationally and the stakeholders in civil society organizations, such as schools, contributing what they can to grass roots change. Educate Girls Globally (EGG) shows what is possible, bringing all major stakeholders together to help reform government schools. Promoting ownership is a powerful motivator in EGG's model reforming government schools.

EGG's model provides powerful lessons on how to increase participation. The key point is to rethink current approaches, reducing hierarchies ("experts" in local problem-solving and the U.S. globally) and recruiting help from all stakeholders (parents, teachers, and kids in school reform; all countries on global issues).

While major issues cut across functional lines, the USG is rigidly organized into separate departments and bureaus, which makes interagency cooperation difficult if not impossible. Unfortunately, such cooperation is essential for solutions to growing numbers of issues. The Department of Defense under COIN, for example, is supposed to promote development; yet this is the traditional province of the USAID, and DOD has little or no money for it. The rigid separation of their functions produces large transaction costs to accomplish things they need to do jointly. Similar examples exist in other problem areas involving multiple agencies. The Obama Administration has achieved important progress in solving this problem.

A second challenge is development of an international order that empowers small and medium-sized countries to increase their roles in addressing international problems. To create new "whole-world" approaches will require changes in global institutions and also changes in how the United States exercises its leadership. Just as with poor people in local communities everywhere, it will be important to create stakes for every country in the new order—in contrast to the present system, in which many countries contribute very little because they have very little stake. A powerful example of this was President Obama's management of the U.S. role in Libya when Muammar Gaddafi turned the Libyan army on his own people. The decision to act was made in Paris. The first military weapons engaged were French. U.S. leadership was obvious for a few days, but the operation was quickly handed to NATO, headed by a Canadian general.

In applying these principles to the greater Middle East, it is important to understand a possible sequence of activities. The first task would be to do demonstration projects showing how to promote social trust. The project(s) need to show a model or models that can operate at strategic scales.

Building organically from the grass roots up will help build governmental capacity even in weak states. Demonstration projects will then provide material for a communications program, communicating possibilities to large audiences.

Needed: Civil Society Research

In reflecting on the challenges confronting us in the greater Middle East, it is important to acknowledge this is a very large subject, and little, unfortunately, is known about it. The first step, therefore, should be to establish an institution or institutions devoted to researching, experimenting with, and implementing civil society models that will address a large variety of

different issues. Since civil society initiatives have become a crucial, potential instrument in the foreign policy “tool box”, the incentive is very great for governments to invest significant resources in researching and developing models of intervention that gain support from host governments and from the societies they serve—and especially that allow proposed changes to be owned by them and not imposed by us.

Just as all countries invest significant resources to research and develop weapons systems because of their strategic importance, it is time we made a similar commitment to research civil society models, which are the new, more critical strategic instruments.

Without serious research and rigorous evaluation of all proposed civil society interventions, it will be difficult to make commitments on strategic scales to specific models. Empowerment models, working on and through government institutions, have natural advantages of cost, scale and sustainability. Unfortunately, little is known about how they might be used in a variety of areas of social need.

Enormous amounts are spent on public health, for example, with powerful results. What public health benefits might we experience from getting people to wash their hands? (If added to EGG’s basic empowerment model built on reforming schools, the additional cost from such a health message would approach zero.)

On clean water, huge efforts are made to solve this issue by digging wells. While this is important, EGG’s project in 500 school produced 178 wells built by people, with no help from EGG. Beyond building wells, what about educating people about how to conserve clean water and perhaps how to purify contaminated water? Once again, existing empowerment models, already in evidence, can show the way, producing very much larger impacts that we are now achieving.

One can imagine significant impacts from empowering people in every area of social need. Private institutions, both CSOs and private corporations, can help enormously in this effort; and they need to help.

Conclusion

The challenge presented to dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and other countries has created a powerful vision of change in the Arab and Muslim countries from Morocco to Pakistan. The vision is of transition from stagnant dictatorships to democratic systems and market economies, offering new opportunities for people, especially women and girls. Open opposition to autocratic regimes is a first step toward a better future. But promoting social development, grounded in local communities, is the real foundation for future democracies and market economies. This took centuries in the West, and there is no reason to expect it will not take great efforts in most countries in the Middle East.

With little idea what to do, Western policymakers often hide behind real engagement with these issues by passing everything to Israel, insisting it make bold concessions on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. No Israeli concessions can rescue these societies and international policymakers from the difficult challenges associated with social development in the region. Israeli peace concessions will contribute no more to solving these social and cultural challenges than the street demonstrations protesting dictatorships did, beginning in Tunisia.

The Arab and Muslim countries from Morocco to Pakistan have not as yet experienced the social development that is need to support democratic institutions and values. Help from outside can play an important role in this development. Most important is to increase social trust, while promoting empowerment and citizenship. For these are the crucial precursors to achieving strong, stable democracies.

I have concentrated here on promoting social development by using civil society initiatives. This development must start by promoting social trust. I have focused on civil society because relatively little is known about it. However, in conclusion, it is important to be aware that market economies and economic entrepreneurship can also play important roles in promoting this development. Creating institutions and rules on property rights, as well as sound economic policies, are also important for this purpose.

Both public and private institutions in the West can make important contributions to economic and social change. Unfortunately, little is now being done to promote these changes, without which the transition to stable democracies in these societies could last decades and even longer. A key impediment to social development is that the foreign policy community, which focuses all attention on governments, knows almost nothing about it. If this does not change, disorder and instability will continue to be the central, tragic realities of life for millions of people in the region.

The change that has begun presents a powerful opportunity to move to a better world. We face a significant opportunity to engage the world with a new strategy that should unite the U.S. political culture and also the political cultures in these societies for change. Deep conflict marred U.S. foreign policy for nearly a decade, beginning a couple of years after 9/11. The strategy presented here draws from the best of both conservative and liberal thought, and there is every sign that all sides of the U.S. political spectrum would support it.

It is difficult to sustain an effective foreign policy when a country is deeply divided about it. These proposals will bring people together. It is crucial, now, that Western governments and private organizations step up and start engaging more than just the weak governments in these countries. Peace in the region and in the world depends on it.

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