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How the West de-democratised the Middle East

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In 1953, a coup backed by the US and UK overthrew the democratically elected government of Iran [AP]

Melbourne, Australia - With the momentous convulsion in the Middle East sparked by Mohamed [Bouazizi's martyrdom](#) in January 2011, it is time to ask what happened to the question which for long dominated Western discourse on the Middle East: Is Islam compatible with democracy? The predominant answer for many years was "no". Among others, Elie Kedourie, MS Lipset, and Huntington advocated such a position. [Bernard Lewis](#), "the most influential postwar historian of Islam and the Middle East", who offered "[the intellectual ammunition for the Iraq War](#)", was most vociferous in upholding this position. Their main argument was that, unlike Christianity, Islam was unique in not differentiating religion from the state and hence democracy was impossible in Muslim polities. Against this *doxa*, I make three arguments.

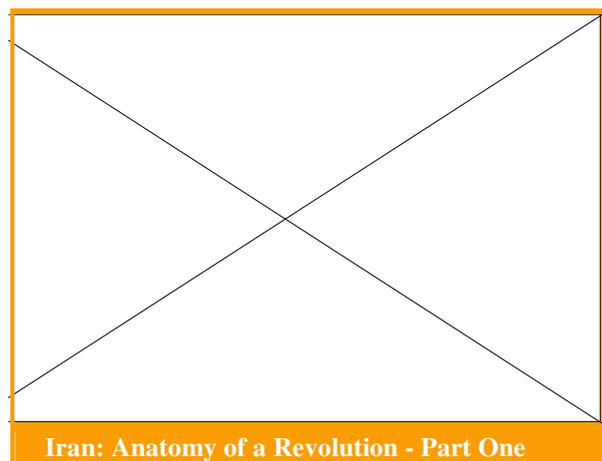
First, the position that Islam is incompatible with democracy was false from the beginning, because it served imperial ambitions of the West and violated Muslims' self-perception that, not only is Islam compatible with democracy, it was one of the engines of democratic empowerment.

Second, I argue that the West's discourse of democratisation of the Middle East is dubious because it hides how the West actually *de-democratised* the Middle East. My contention is that, from the 1940s onwards, democratic experiments were well in place and the West subverted them to advance its own interests. I offer three examples of de-democratisation: The [reportedly](#) CIA-engineered *coup* against the elected government of Syria in 1949, the *coup* [orchestrated by the US and UK](#) against the democratic Iran in 1953 and subversion of Bahrain's democracy [in the 1970s](#). I also touch on the West's recent de-democratisation in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Third, I explain that the Middle East was de-democratised because the West rarely saw it as a collection of *people* with dynamic, rich social-cultural textures. The Western power elites viewed the Middle East as no more than a region of multiple resources and strategic interests; hence their aim was to keep it "stable" and "manageable". To Ernest Bevin, foreign secretary (1945-51) of imperial Britain, without "its oil and other potential resources" there was "no hope of our being able to achieve the standard of life at which we [are] aiming in Great Britain".

The false debate

The Western view about Islam being incompatible with democracy is rooted in the Enlightenment which, contrary to the received wisdom, was prejudiced - and, to cite John Trumbour, "shot through with Islamophobia". Thus Alexis de Tocqueville held that the Quran laid stress on faith, not splendid deeds, as a result of which Islam was inhospitable to democracy. In the post-World War II era, Kedouri, Huntington, Lewis and others presented different versions of this argument.



This Western view was, however, seldom shared by Muslims who believed that Islam and democracy were perfectly compatible. As early as 1912, the Indian philosopher Abul Kalam Azad (b1888) wrote: "Islam regards every form of government which is non-constitutional and non-parliamentary as the greatest human sin." Turkey's Mustafa Fazil Pasha (b1829)

held that Islam determined one's destiny in afterlife but it "does not limit the rights of the people". Abdullah Abdurrahman of South Africa (b1870) observed that, without full equality, "there is no such thing as a democratic institution". Without multiplying examples, it is suffice to note that the notion of divine sovereignty advanced by India's Maududi and Egypt's Qutb were complex developments unfolding much later.

Contrary to Muslims' self-perception, the debate on Islam's alleged incompatibility with democracy continued in the post-war era. Encapsulated under "modernisation", this debate was integral to the West's domination of the Middle East, because empire maintains itself not just by brute force but also by presenting itself at the service of rhetoric such as democracy. In the US, this took an institutional form in 1983 when the Reagan administration floated the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Though currently the United States Agency of International Development ([USAID](#)), established in 1961 by John F Kennedy, claims that the US "has a long history of extending a helping hand to those people overseas struggling to ... live in a free and democratic country" and that the US foreign assistance "has always had the ... purpose of expanding democracy". At the time of USAID's formation, its aim was not democracy promotion but to counter communism through economic aid and development.

Even in 1997, long after NED's formation, Fareed Zakaria - now editor-at-large of *Newsweek* (although then managing editor at *Foreign Policy Magazine*) and a neo-realist apologist of US policy - undermined democracy by justifying the Middle East's authoritarian rulers [as follows](#): "In many parts of that world, such as Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, and some of the Gulf states, were elections to be held tomorrow, the resulting regimes would almost certainly be more illiberal than the ones now in place." Neither Zakaria nor USAID, however, says how the US, and its allies such as Britain, were responsible, not for promoting, but demoting democracy. This is what I mean by de-democratisation of the Middle East by the West. Let me give some examples.

De-democratisation of Syria, Iran, Bahrain, Afghanistan and Iraq

Syria

Perhaps the earliest theatre of de-democratisation was Syria. True to the logic of colonialism, as imperial Britain and France dismembered and divided the Ottoman Empire to install the mandate system under the covenant of the League of Nations, Syria fell under the French rule from which it only gained independence in 1946. While still under French control, Syria held presidential elections, following which an elected government (based on universal male suffrage) led by Shukri al-Quwatly, came to power for a five-year term starting August 1943. The Syrian government, after its independence, was thus constitutional and based on democracy. In March 1949, the US organised a *coup d'état* against al-Quwatly's government to install military rule, presided over by Colonel Husni al-Zaim. Based on [research](#) from declassified documents now available, it is well-established that Stephen Meade, a CIA operative, played a key role in staging that coup. Meade had met al-Zaim at least six times. To Miles Copland, a US diplomat in Damascus, al-Zaim was "America's boy".

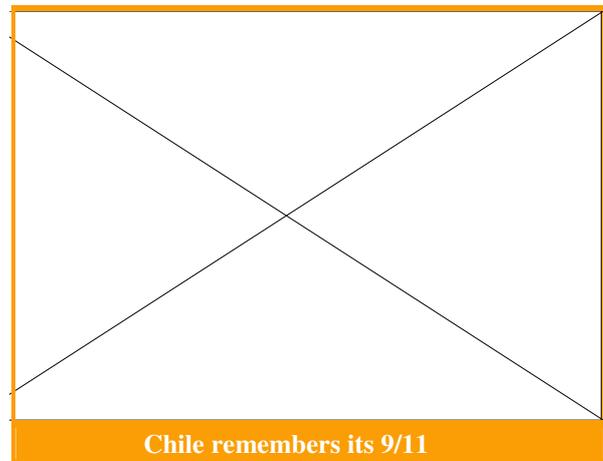
The US de-democratised Syria because al-Quwatly's democratic government was nationalist and unwilling to toe the US line. He had informed Washington that Syria wouldn't adopt any policy that went against its security and sovereignty, even if "it meant defying America". Of its several aims, the US wanted Syria to fulfill at least two, which Colonel al-Zaim joyfully did. He legitimised Israel by signing an armistice and ratified the

[TAPLINE](#) (Trans-Arabian Pipeline Company) project, allowing ARAMCO (Arabian-American Oil Company) to pipe Saudi oil across Syria to the Mediterranean. The Syrian parliament had earlier rejected both these demands, reportedly due, among other reasons, to Western and US support for the partition of Palestine, and the creation and support of Israel during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. Between 1949, when the al-Quwatly's democratic government was dislodged, and 1955, five more coups were organised. The foundations for the de-democratisation of Syria could not have been stronger.

Iran

The next major theatre of de-democratisation was Iran, whose elected government was overthrown, in 1953, by a US-UK alliance. Mohammad Mosaddeq was Iran's elected prime minister. He enjoyed the approval of Iran's parliament for his nationalisation programme. The US and UK organised a CIA-led *coup* to oust Mosaddeq - because Iran refused make oil concessions to the West. During World War II, the UK had taken control of Iran to prevent oil from being passed to its ally, the Soviet Union. Through the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, the UK continued to control Iran's oil after the war. The French-educated Mosaddeq was highly critical of Iran's draining of resources to the West. Soon after getting elected as prime minister in March 1951, Mosaddeq and his National Front alliance had moved to nationalise Iranian oil and throw out foreign control of oil fields. One such was the Abadan refinery, then the largest in the world. The UK retaliated by imposing economic sanctions, backed by its heavy naval presence in the region. Mosaddeq, however, was undeterred; his popularity only increased among the Iranian people. Faced with Mosaddeq's resistance, the UK-US alliance staged a coup to over throw Mosaddeq's government.

The 1953 coup in Iran was significant also for Central and South America. Indeed, subsequently it became a model for regime change. Only a year later, in 1954, as the [New York Times](#) noted in 2000, the CIA staged a successful coup in Guatemala. We should also note the CIA plot on 9/11. Not the 9/11 we know think of - but the 9/11 of 1973. On that occasion, the CIA toppled the democratic government of Salvador Allende in Chile to replace it with the dictatorship of General Pinochet, who brutally ruled for 17 long years.



Bahrain

Another theatre of de-democratisation in the Middle East was Bahrain, formerly a British protectorate. In 1971, Bahrain became independent. In December 1973, the first elections (only men participated) were held to elect the thirty members of *al-majlis al-watani*, the National Assembly. That assembly challenged the unbridled authority of the al-Khalifa family which had ruled Bahrain since 1783. A major challenge to the clan came in the form of the assembly's demand for the eviction of the US Navy base from Bahrain. Let it be noted that the US military presence in Bahrain dates to 1949. After the withdrawal of British forces from there, the US presence increased. Legally, Bahrain's assembly was right in asking for the eviction of the US Navy. But the ruling al-Khalifas dissolved the assembly

on August 26, 1975. There was then no democracy until 2002. Various vibrant institutions of civil society, such as trade unions, were all crushed.

Clearly, what mattered to the US were not the voices and aspirations of Bahraini people but America's own national interest, which was to keep its base. Admiral Crow justified this, saying that "on general principles ... the [US] Navy did not want to leave a place where they were already established". One may say that there was no "external" intervention and the al-Khalifa family took a "sovereign internal" decision to dissolve the assembly. However, in the Middle East (as elsewhere) the drawing of lines between internal and external is a difficult business.

Afghanistan

The West's de-democratisation continued in Afghanistan. After the fall of the Taliban, an UN-sponsored conference took place (in November 2001) in Bonn to decide Afghanistan's future. The avowed objective was to install democracy and women's freedom in Afghanistan. Leaving aside the issue of the extent to which the Afghan delegates invited to Bonn were representative of the Afghan population, it is instructive to note that the leader Abdul Satar Sirat, elected by a majority of votes to lead the interim government, was asked to give way to Hamid Karzai. The decision to install "democracy" in Afghanistan was itself taken undemocratically. The aim clearly was not to install democracy but to install Karzai, "our man", who was eager to pursue Western ambitions. A decade since then, journalists such as James Fergusson, author of *A million bullets* and *Taliban*, now complain that Karzai is "absolutely not interested in the principles of democracy". Was this the goal, however? The former Australian prime minister, John Howard, later admitted that West did not want to get embroiled in Afghanistan's reconstruction or any messy "nation-building". Surgical operations in Afghanistan were the key goal.

Iraq

The story of de-democratisation was similar in Iraq. Following the Western invasion of Iraq as the government fell in April 2003, people in places as diverse as Mosul (a Kurdish town), Samara (with a Sunni Arab majority), Hilla and Najaf (both Shia towns), and Baghdad spontaneously organised meetings to elect representatives for reconstruction, safety and provision of essential infrastructure. It was a popular democratic initiative in the true sense of the term. However, the US thwarted all such democratic initiatives by nullifying the decisions and plans the elected representatives of various councils had made. In their place, the US appointed their own, reliable (unelected) people, including former Baathists.

The 'why' of de-democratisation

Why did the West de-democratise the Middle East? It did so, I submit, because seldom did its power elites see the region as a people with diverse, dynamic social-cultural texture instead of a repository of multiple resources and strategic interests. Hence their prime aim was to keep the Middle East "stable" and "manageable".

In 1984, Robert W Stookey, a prominent member of the US foreign service (with postings in the Middle East and a doctorate in political science), published *The Arabian Peninsula: Zone of Ferment* from Stanford University's Hoover Institution. The books published from the Hoover Institution were "concerned with the US involvement in world and regional politics". Stookey began the book's introduction as follows: "Considering the economic and strategic significance for our national interests, the Arabian peninsula is not well known to

the general public." And this is how, within the framework of US national interest, he made the Middle East "known" to his Western audience. Saudi Arabia, he noted, had the "possession of one-fourth of the non-communist world's oil reserves" and thus described it (and Kuwait) as "oil-rich". In contrast, he called the then-two Yemens "oil-less". It is evident how the Middle East made any sense to the West only in relation to whether it was "oil-rich" or "oil-less".

Such a conceptualisation of the Middle East was articulated by imperial Britain, whose viceroy to India, Lord Curzon, wrote in the 19th century: "Turkestan, Afghanistan, Transcaspia, Persia - to many these words breathe only a sense of utter remoteness, or a memory of strange vicissitudes and of moribund romance. To me, I confess they are pieces on a chessboard upon which is being played out a game for the domination of the world." Indeed, the term "Middle East" itself is imperial. "Middle" between which two points or locations? And yes, East of what? Clearly, it is a geographical designation which puts the West at the centre of the world. In the late 19th century, Alfred Mahan, a US navy officer, invented the term "Middle East" and used it in his book *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*. Halford Mackinder, a liberal imperialist of Britain, later popularised it.

I have argued how the West's claim of spreading democracy in the Middle East is bogus. Against the West's claims, I have instead shown how it continually de-democratised one country after another. Like India, the world's largest democracy which is largely disinterested in - and indirectly hostile to - democratic movements in Bhutan and Burma, the West has been largely hostile to genuine democracy in the Middle East so as to nurture its interests - geopolitical and strategic - by keeping the Mubaraks and the Shahs "stable".

Irfan Ahmad is a political anthropologist and a lecturer at Monash University, Australia and author of Islamism and Democracy in India: The Transformation of Jamaat-e-Islami (Princeton University Press, 2009) which was short-listed for the 2011 International Convention of Asian Scholars Book Prize for the best study in the field of Social Sciences.

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