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Book Guide

Realism and Democracy

In *Realism and Democracy: American Foreign Policy after the Arab Spring*, Elliott Abrams tells a personal story of the development of U.S. human rights policy in the last forty years and makes an argument, both "realist" and principled, for supporting the expansion of democracy in the Middle East.

Summary

Setbacks to political liberalization in the Arab world have caused the United States to turn away from support for democrats there in favor of "pragmatic" deals with tyrants in order to defeat violent Islamist extremism. This strategy is dangerously shortsighted: "Our own interests are best served by Arab governments that are legitimate, decent, and stable and are able to combat extremism effectively."

In *Realism and Democracy: American Foreign Policy after the Arab Spring*, Elliott Abrams, a senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, advocates for an American foreign policy that combines both practical politics and idealism in supporting those struggling for democracy and human rights in the Arab world. He argues that governments that rule through brute force, without any legitimacy in the eyes of their own population, are ultimately unstable and unreliable allies for the United States.

The book examines the United States' record of democracy promotion in the region and beyond, from the Cold War to the Barack Obama years. Abrams makes several recommendations to U.S. policymakers, concluding that "Our principles and our security interests both suggest that we should be giving repression and tyranny far more effective opposition, and freedom and democracy far more effective support."

Main Takeaways

The United States should:

1. Place promoting democracy and defending human rights back at the center of U.S. foreign policy.
2. Ensure that the president and secretary of state, not career diplomats or lower-ranking officials, are seen as the primary sources of diplomatic statements and actions to make clear that support for human rights and democracy starts at the top.
3. Refrain from supporting and strengthening illegitimate regimes, and press for gradual but real political openings in Arab states that repress liberal, moderate, and democratic voices—forces that are a main bulwark against Islamist extremist ideas.
4. Recognize that assistance programs for nongovernmental organizations and civil society cannot substitute for top-level American political support and efforts to open political space for real competition.
5. Remember that a global belief in U.S. support for freedom remains an invaluable asset for the country.

This book is suitable for the following types of undergraduate and graduate courses:

- U.S. Foreign Policy
- Middle East Politics

Discussion Questions

Courses on U.S. Foreign Policy

1. How has the role of democracy promotion in U.S. foreign policy changed over time?
2. Is democracy promotion in the national interest of the United States?
3. Some describe U.S. democracy promotion efforts as a failure. Others consider them a hallmark of American foreign policy success. Which of these perspectives is a better assessment of American foreign policy?
4. Is there a difference between promoting respect for human rights and promoting democracy?
5. Compare and contrast the attitudes and policies toward democracy promotion of the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations.
6. Incorporating the recommendations Abrams makes in *Realism and Democracy*, how would you assess the efforts of the Donald J. Trump administration in promoting democracy in the Middle East?

Courses on Middle East Politics

1. Why does the Arab Middle East appear to have a worse record on democracy than any other region of the globe?
2. What role can nongovernmental organizations play in promoting democracy and human rights in the Middle East?
3. What are the benefits and drawbacks of political transitions from autocracy to democracy?
4. What challenges do political openings pose for citizens living under autocratic regimes that begin a transition to a more open political system?
5. What lessons can Middle Eastern activists learn from democracy movements during the Cold War, whether in Latin America, Asia, or Europe?
6. What is the status of democracy in the Middle East today?

Supplementary Materials

William F. Buckley, Jr., "Human Rights and Foreign Policy: A Proposal," *Foreign Affairs* 58, no. 4 (Spring 1980): 775-796.

Thomas Carothers, *Critical Mission: Essays on Democracy Promotion* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004).

Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," *Commentary*, November 1, 1979.

Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Random House, 2011).

Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

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