



# Democratization Vs. Liberalization in the Arab World: Dilemmas and Challenges for U.S. Foreign Policy

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## **Democratization Vs. Liberalization in the Arab World: Dilemmas and Challenges for U.S. Foreign Policy** U.S. Department of Defense

The author looks at the political origins and dynamics of "liberalized autocracy" in the Arab world. Liberalized autocracy is a system of rule that allows for a measure of political openness and competition in the electoral, party, and press arenas, while ultimately ensuring that power rests in the hands of ruling regimes. This mix of control and openness has not only benefited ruling elites, but oppositions as well. It gives them room to "let off steam," to criticize regimes, and occasionally to affect public policy. Moreover, given the absence of consensus in many Arab states over national identity, liberalized autocracy has provided an umbrella by which competing groups--Islamists, secularists, Kurds, and Berbers--can achieve a measure of peaceful coexistence precisely because no group actually wields power. The United States largely has supported such hybrid systems, a fact of political life that has not changed dramatically under the Bush administration despite its rhetorical commitment to democracy. Whether the gap between words and deeds should or can be closed or narrowed is a complex question, since a sudden move from state-managed liberalization to democracy could open the door to Islamist power.

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