

Democratic Transitions: What Role for External Actors?

Notes for a Presentation at the conference on
The Mediterranean, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe: The EU and NATO's Wider
Neighborhood
Lisbon, December 13-14, 2004

Marina Ottaway, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Supportive, not central role - The role of external actors in democratic transitions is at best a supportive one. It can never be the central role—countries do not democratize because outsiders will them to do so, or impose conditionalities until they do so. In some cases, the role of external actors can be extremely damaging—for example if they force changes that are not supported by domestic political forces and for which conditions are not ripe—any reform, introduced prematurely, can be very damaging. An example is the Bosnian elections.

Different Roles by Different External Actors in Different Countries -The role of external actors depend on the character of the actors themselves and the relation they have with the government, political parties, and civil organizations of the country supposedly in transition. For example, the United States role in the democratic transitions in Eastern Europe will never be replicated in the Middle East, because in Eastern Europe the United States was the symbol of democracy for the reformers, while in the Middle East even reformers are leery of the United States. Nor can European countries and the United States play identical roles in the Middle East because they relate differently to the regional actors.

Types of Roles – Outsiders can play a role in democratic transitions by:

- Setting an example of democratic solutions
- Keeping pressure on incumbent governments to introduce reform
- Helping countervailing forces such as political parties and organizations of civil society develop better
- Acting as watch dogs
- Discuss democratic reform, thus forcing an internal debate in the target countries.

But there are many things outsiders cannot do or very often do badly.

- Outsiders cannot build institutions. Institution-building is one of the great myths of democracy promotion. Outsiders can help countries find a solution to specific problems they face and set up processes to handle those problems. If those solutions and processes in fact solve the problem, they will eventually become well-implanted or institutionalized. In transitional period, solutions are often required that should not be institutionalized in the long run—e.g. truth and reconciliation commissions.
- Outsiders cannot devise solutions. They can help countries find their own solutions, rather than insisting that they adopt those that work in the donor country or in other countries the donors helped. What worked in Serbia will not necessarily work in the Ukraine. External actors often learn the wrong lessons, or try to apply the lessons from one experience to completely different countries. The early drawing of analogies to the occupation of Germany and Japan caused a lot of damage in Iraq, for example
- Outsiders cannot build a civil society. They can provide money and training for NGOs, but they cannot make those NGOs part of civil society—that is an internal process.

Europe and the United States in the Middle East – The roles of Europe and the US in the Middle East are very different because of the fundamental differences between US and European foreign policies and the specific assets they bring to the Middle East.

US has power, and therefore elicits responses, but it is not trusted. Furthermore, the United States has a poor record of sustaining long term policies—the Cold War is the major exception. European countries are much better at sustaining policies over the long run, but very timid in asserting themselves. Arabs distrust the United States and are less suspicious of Europe. The downside is that they do not feel obliged to respond to Europe as they do to the United States—even when the response is negative, there is a response. This means that the US and Europe may be much more effective in promoting democracy in the Middle East if they work separately toward that goal, rather than working on joint initiatives.