

More Freedom, Less Terror?

Liberalization and Political Violence
in the Arab World

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“Democracy” and Terrorism in the Arab World: A Framework for Analysis

Introduction

Very little empirical work has seriously investigated the widespread policy assumption that the promotion of democracy in the Middle East will help “dry up the swamp” of international terrorism. Indeed, the linkages between democracy and terrorism are more often asserted than explained. A senior administration official who helped draft President Bush’s national strategy to combat terrorism reportedly could not cite any authoritative study linking the rise of democracy with the defeat of terrorism, other than to say “I’m personally a huge fan of John Stuart Mill.”¹ Considering that democratization was offered as at least one of the objectives of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and remains a component of U.S. policy in the region today,² it is critical that we better understand this relationship. This study attempts to do so by grounding our analysis with empirical data from the Arab world—the region that inspired this debate in the first place.³

¹ Cited in Hirsh (2006).

² Although the “freedom agenda” is not as prominent in President Bush’s second term, the administration has not entirely abandoned the concept, even if it is taking a more nuanced approach to the issue in light of Iraq. See, for example, Carpenter (2008). Presidential candidates for the 2008 U.S. elections have also debated the role of democracy promotion in U.S. regional strategy. See Cook (2007b).

³ Of course, democracy promotion is not new to American foreign policy, but the explicit linkage between democracy promotion and the prevention of terrorism is a relatively recent

What are the mechanisms through which democracy (or, more accurately, liberalization in the Arab context) is supposed to reduce extremism? What is it about democratic systems that will lead organized political actors to turn toward nonviolent rather than violent means to express their views and demands and reduce popular support for terrorist actions? Or, as some are now asking, does democracy have anything to do with terrorism and, if so, might it make matters worse?⁴ Even if democracy may have a moderating effect—in line with democratic peace theory—does the process of democratization in transitional societies lead to more rather than less violent behavior?⁵ And how do such concepts apply to liberalization processes in the Arab world, given that the region still lacks democracy and arguably genuine democratization? Answers to these questions clearly have significant implications for U.S. democracy promotion and counterterrorism policies in the Middle East. We seek to address these questions by developing a number of potential causal connections drawn from this broader debate, which we then assess in six empirical case studies: Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, and Morocco.

We find that reform processes in the Arab world have varied effects in different contexts, on different types of political actors, and over time. In some cases, reform efforts have had a moderating influence and have prevented radicalization and a resort to violence. In other instances, liberalization measures have destabilizing effects, particularly given the limited and controlled manner in which such measures are implemented.

Our study also suggests that it would be a mistake to define the effects of political reform on political violence based only on one case (e.g., Iraq) or one type of terrorist actor (e.g., al-Qa'ida). A more nuanced understanding through other cases, such as those we include in this study, reveals that some positive dynamics are possible while also illustrating the deleterious and at times unintended repercussions of limited reform processes, particularly when backtracking is apparent.

concept developed in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in the United States.

⁴ The most prominent piece sparking such questions is Gause (2005).

⁵ For an elaboration of this argument globally, see Mansfield and Snyder (2005).

Rather than abandon the reform agenda entirely—particularly given that regionals themselves are unlikely to abandon such efforts⁶—American policymakers should develop more-refined understandings and approaches toward democracy in this region. In particular, our findings suggest the need to focus on political rights, human rights practices, and institution-building as much as elections.⁷ The cases in this study also suggest that one of the most important elements of reform, in terms of stemming radicalization, is strengthening the legitimacy of the existing system through, for example, greater adherence to rule of law, human rights, and government transparency. What seems to produce the most frustration in repressed societies is not that people cannot go to the polls, but rather the lack of personal freedoms and rights.

Finally, it is important to underscore what this study is *not* about. This is not a study examining the sources of terrorism.⁸ We recognize that the sources of terrorism are complex and multifaceted, and no one antidote is likely to address entirely its root causes. For this reason, we do not extensively examine other underlining factors (such as levels of economic development or education) that may foster extremism,⁹

⁶ In recent years, calls for reform have been rising in the Arab world. Among the more noted documents drawing attention to the so-called democracy deficit in the Arab world have been the UN Human Development Reports (2002, 2003, 2004a, 2005). Also, see the Alexandria Statement (2004); Arab Center for the Development of the Rule of Law and Integrity and the International Foundation for the Election Systems (2007a, 2007b); "Arabs Speak Out About Democracy in New Reports" (2007); and "Arabs Rate Democratic Institutions, Urge Reforms in New Report" (2007).

⁷ However, some analysts argue that although elections may produce destabilizing results in the Middle East, they are a reality that U.S. policymakers cannot ignore. See, for example, Dunne (2007).

⁸ For the seminal work on the causes of terrorism, see Crenshaw (1981). Crenshaw observes that the lack of political participation is one cause of terrorism but by no means the only one, as the causes of terrorism are multiple and can be distinguished between those that are pre-conditions as opposed to direct causes. For an updated review of this question in a post-9/11 context, see Cronin (2002–2003).

⁹ Moreover, many studies have questioned the relationship between economic or educational factors and terrorism, noting, for example, that many terrorists (including those responsible for the 9/11 attacks), are highly educated and economically well off. In his study of Muslim insurgencies, Mohamed Hafez finds no correlation between economic depriva-

although we take note of economic factors as they relate to issues of political inclusion or other liberalization measures in various cases.¹⁰ This is also not a study about how to end terrorism,¹¹ though our analysis would, again, suggest skepticism about any one solution solving such a multidimensional and varied challenge. And finally, this is not a study about the state of democracy (or more accurately its absence) in the Arab world today.¹²

Rather, our study asks a more specific question: Has the introduction of political reforms into this region over the past 15 years (from 1991 to 2006) alleviated the problem of terrorism and violent extremism? If so, in what ways and under what conditions? If not, why? What are the costs of Arab states reversing political reforms and reverting to repressive policies in terms of the potential for increased terrorism? In short, what are the *effects* of liberalization on opposition to or support for political violence in this critical area of the world?

Democracy in the Middle East: “Liberalized Autocracies” or Genuine Democratization?

What do we mean by democracy in the Middle East? Analysts vary on definitions and the type of data necessary to assess the state of reform

tion and levels of political violence. For his critique of economic factors, see Hafez (2003). On this issue, also see Krueger and Maleckova (2003); Blomberga, Hess, and Weerapana (2004); and Piazza (2006).

¹⁰ For a study on the effects of social and economic development as a tool in stemming terrorism, see Cragin and Chalk (2003).

¹¹ On this question, see Cronin (2006).

¹² While we certainly track the nature and extent of political reforms in the case studies, our interest is in assessing the effects of various reforms or rollbacks, not in analyzing the reforms themselves at length. For overviews and progress report assessments of liberalization in the Middle East, see, for example, Diamond, Plattner, and Brumberg (2003); Saikal and Schnabel (2003); Carothers and Ottaway (2005); Handelman and Tessler (1999); Richards (2005); Ottaway et al. (2005); Bellin (2004); and Albrecht and Schlumberger (2004). For continuous updates on the state of democratic reforms across the region, see the *Arab Reform Bulletin*, published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Also see Marc Lynch’s blog, Abu Aardvark (Lynch, n.d.).

among different Middle East states.¹³ Yet consensus has emerged on two central points: (1) A new wave of political reforms (commonly referred to as “liberalization”) emerged in the region beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s and (2) such reforms have not yet led to the emergence of democracies and, arguably, genuine democratization (i.e., the process of transitioning from authoritarian rule to democracy) anywhere in the Arab world. If anything, many regimes have backtracked on even limited reforms, though there is significant variation in liberalization efforts across the region, including the cases included in this study.

Indeed, the limited and often controlled nature of political openings has led some analysts to question whether generic democracy theories outlining a staged and largely linear transition from authoritarianism to democracy apply to regions such as the Middle East. Daniel Brumberg’s concept of “liberalized autocracy” best characterizes such skepticism, suggesting that liberalization measures initiated by autocrats may permanently stall, as such leaders have no intention of opening up the political system to allow for popular participation, civil liberties, and rights that are protected by law (common attributes of functioning democracies).¹⁴ In Brumberg’s view, liberalized autocracy is not just “the trademark mixture of guided pluralism, controlled elections, and selective repression” but rather “a *type* of political system whose institutions, rules, and logic defy any linear model of democratization.”¹⁵

Limited political and civil openings that are often initiated and ultimately controlled by the state (a common regime survival strategy to offset economic or other societal pressures) may indicate liberalization, but not real political inclusion or even a process that might lead to such inclusion (democratization).¹⁶ As Brumberg and Diamond explain:

¹³ See, for example, Iliya Harik’s critique (2006) of Freedom House measurements.

¹⁴ Brumberg (2003 and 2005).

¹⁵ Brumberg (2003, p. 35). Other analysts have noted the limitations of traditional democracy definitions for regions like the Middle East, where the phenomenon of elections without democracy is prevalent. See, for example, Diamond (2002).

¹⁶ For a distinction between liberalism and democracy, and the related concept of illiberal democracy, see Zakaria (2003). Also, see Jaber (2003).

“Arab leaders look to liberalization as a way to divide the opposition even while letting it blow off steam. The proliferation of civil society groups, a somewhat open press, and access to the Internet and satellite television can create a feeling of virtual democracy without opening the doors to dramatic reforms. . . . Liberalization without popular sovereignty or political accountability is thus the essence of liberalized autocracy—a form of hybrid regime that produces ‘elections without democracy.’”¹⁷ According to this assessment, a program of liberalization that “*actually* intended to achieve democratization” would have to go much further than even the most “liberal” of the autocratic states in the region, such as Morocco or Jordan, have gone.¹⁸ Steven Cook similarly suggests that measures such as a relaxation of police powers, greater freedoms for political association, and institutional changes that weaken regimes’ political control would be more accurate indicators for the transition from authoritarianism to genuine democratization than merely the existence of elections.¹⁹ Given the persistence of authoritarianism in this region, and even its “upgrading,”²⁰ many regional analysts share Brumberg and Diamond’s skepticism that such hybrid regimes will ever move beyond limited reforms.

That said, some analysts argue that even limited political reforms can still have significant and long-lasting effects. As Jillian Schwedler argues, the tendency to focus on the stalled nature of reform “overlooks the often dramatic evolution in public political space that results from even limited political openings. . . . Political parties organize, publish agendas, and seek to build a constituency. Public political debates expand, and the language of democracy is invoked by both state and nonstate actors. . . . These developments are often dismissed because the broader process is not ‘moving forward’ and meaningful democ-

¹⁷ Brumberg and Diamond (2003).

¹⁸ Such indicators for “real” democratization would include lifting all restrictions on the press, intellectual freedom, and associations; setting up independent and accountable institutions (courts, electoral commissions, audit offices, anticorruption agencies, central banks); and, of course, free and fair electoral competition. See Brumberg and Diamond (2003).

¹⁹ Cook (2007a, p. 148).

²⁰ Heydemann (2007).

ocracy is nowhere on the horizon."²¹ In her study of Jordan and Yemen, Schwedler finds that even though nondemocratic regimes are still in place, reforms have led to the restructuring of public political space in a way that is promoting pluralist practices. Other analysts focusing on Morocco also offer a less pessimistic perspective, suggesting that recent elections in that country have continued its "partial democratization" process and that limited reform may have a "limited shelf life."²²

The aim of this study is not to explain the persistence of authoritarianism in this region²³ or to settle the debate about whether liberalized autocracies in the Middle East are a permanent fixture or a hybrid system capable of moving toward real democratization. Our objective is to assess how the limited reforms and liberalization processes we have witnessed to date have affected calculations toward the use of political violence.²⁴

To make such an assessment, we adopt a broad understanding of such reforms, including not only political rights but also civil liber-

²¹ Schwedler (2006a, p. 193).

²² McFaul and Wittes (2008, p. 21).

²³ For different explanations of the persistence of authoritarianism in the Middle East, see Bellin (2004) and Albrecht and Schlumberger (2004). Bellin argues the "robustness" of authoritarianism is not because the Middle East lacks the prerequisites for democracy (i.e., the Arab exceptionalism argument), but rather because of the strength and effectiveness of states' "coercive apparatus" that prevents viable opposition. Albrecht and Schlumberger also observe that the lack of any effective, well-organized, and financed autonomous groups that can compete or oppose state power (except for non-co-opted Islamic groups) explains the continued trend toward authoritarian rule in the region. Richards (2005) adds external political impediments to the list of reasons why the transition away from authoritarianism toward democracy is so difficult in the Arab world. For further discussion of the impediments and opportunities for the transition away from authoritarianism, including dilemmas of rentier states, see Kazemi and Norton (1999).

²⁴ The effects of genuine democratization or democracy on terrorism and political violence may or may not produce similar dynamics as those we identify based on more limited political reform measures. It is possible, for example, that real democratization could either lead to greater political violence than we see resulting from more limited reforms because of the greater political stakes, or conversely, less political violence because of the genuine incorporation of a wide range of political and social actors into the system. Much, of course, would depend on how quickly and in what manner democratization came about. We thank Larry Diamond for bringing this point to our attention.

ties and freedoms. Such inclusive definitions are more appropriate for a study assessing the effects of reform on levels of political violence, because many assumptions about the way in which democracy is, in theory, supposed to reduce extremism are not limited to greater participation in the political process. They also relate to the promotion of greater tolerance for opposing opinions and groups and venues to express opposition views, as well as the level of repression in a given society.

Consequently, this study draws to some extent on Freedom House (FH) data because FH adopts such broad understandings of democracy. The FH index ranks countries' level of freedom based on both political rights and civil liberties, scoring countries in both categories separately and then providing a combined score.²⁵ Political rights are measured by the extent to which people participate freely in the political process, including legitimate elections, competition for public office, political parties, and organizations. Civil liberties include the freedom of expression and beliefs, associational rights, rule of law, and personal autonomy from the state.²⁶ Freedom House ranks countries on a scale of 1 to 7 based on these types of variables, with a score of 1 indicating the highest degree of freedom and 7 the least. These scores are shown in Table 1.1. Countries with a combined score from 1 to 2.5 are considered "Free," 3 to 5 "Partly Free," and 5.5 to 7 "Not Free." All Arab states fall into either the "Partly Free" or "Not Free" categories, including the six case studies we examine at length.

Because no Arab democracies exist, this study considers the effects of more limited political reform efforts on political violence and extremism in the Arab world, not the relationship between developed democracies and terrorism.

Finally, the democracy literature not only helps us understand how to interpret "democracy" in a region such as Middle East, it also

²⁵ For a detailed overview of Freedom House methodology, see Freedom House (2007).

²⁶ Freedom House bases its ratings on a checklist of 10 political rights questions and 15 civil liberties questions. Political rights are grouped into three categories (electoral process, political pluralism and participation, and functioning government) while the civil liberties questions are based on four categories (freedom of expression and belief, associational and organizational rights, rule of law, and personal autonomy and individual rights).

Table 1.1
2007 Freedom House Scores for
Arab League States

Country	FH Score
Partly Free	
Comoros	3.5
Kuwait	4
Jordan	4.5
Lebanon	4.5
Mauritania	4.5
Morocco	4.5
Bahrain	5
Djibouti	5
Yemen	5
Not Free	
Algeria	5.5
Egypt	5.5
Oman	5.5
Qatar	5.5
Tunisia	5.5
United Arab Emirates	5.5
Iraq	6
Saudi Arabia	6.5
Syria	6.5
Libya	7
Somalia	7
Sudan	7

suggests the sequence in which democracies are likely to emerge. Most significantly, democracy theorists working in a comparative perspective view the establishment of impartial and effective state institutions (e.g., bureaucracies, police, a judiciary that implements the rule of law) as

critical early steps in democratization efforts.²⁷ Such analysts argue that political inclusion (e.g., elections) should follow, rather than precede, such institutional development. In other words, democracy promotion should not just consist of a checklist of various reforms to encourage in random fashion, but rather should take into account the crucial element of *sequence*. That said, other democracy analysts question the sequencing logic, given the realities of reform processes in regions such as the Middle East, where autocrats are unlikely to voluntarily pursue institutional reform and rule of law without the pressure produced by competitive election processes.²⁸

Despite these limits, the sequencing dilemma still offers important insights into reform processes in transitional states. Drawing on the principles of democratic theorists such as Robert Dahl, political scientists Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder argue, for example, that “Where rules, habits, and institutions of competitive politics were well established before holding unfettered mass elections . . . the transition to democracy went relatively smoothly. In contrast, where mass electoral politics developed before the institutions to regulate political competition were in place, transitions were prone to conflict. . . . Elites tended to feel threatened by political change, and leaders often deployed nationalism as a justification for intolerance and repression.”²⁹ Such understandings can help explain the instability in Iraq, with sectarianism perhaps replacing nationalism as the central justification for continued conflict in ethnically fractured nations such as those in the Middle East.

Consequently, many democracy analysts view the establishment of viable state institutions as far more significant than, for example, civil society development. While civil society development can be helpful, some democracy analysts question whether such groups—particularly in the Middle East, where many Western-supported nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have limited domestic grassroots support—can

²⁷ See, for example, Bellin (2004).

²⁸ Carothers (2007a).

²⁹ Mansfield and Snyder (2005, pp. 8–9). They draw on Dahl’s *Polyarchy* (1971) in this assessment.

make a significant difference in furthering political reform.³⁰ Others observe that not only is civil society development in the Middle East limited, but not all groups are politically neutral, and some may even promote norms and policies that run counter to U.S. interests.³¹ Instead, strengthening state institutions may have a greater impact. These are important lessons to keep in mind when considering prescriptions for U.S. democracy promotion,³² which we discuss further in the final chapter.

Understanding Terrorism

Definitions of terrorism are famously contested and varied. And in large-n statistical studies, definitions of terrorism can have a significant impact on research results. However, in this study, because we are not engaging in such analysis but rather are focused on in-depth case studies drawing on qualitative and quantitative measures, different interpretations of terrorism should not affect our research conclusions as dramatically. For our quantitative examination of terrorist incidents in our cases, we draw on the RAND–Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism (MIPT) Terrorism Incident Database's definition of terrorism, which determines the content of the database. According to the RAND-MIPT definition,

Terrorism is violence calculated to create an atmosphere of fear and alarm to coerce others into actions they would not otherwise

³⁰ For detailed discussions of the role of civil society in the Middle East, see Hawthorne (2005); Carothers (1999–2000); Ottaway and Carothers (2000); and Norton (1994 and 1995).

³¹ Berman (2003). Tamara Wittes (2004) also notes the potentially negative effects of civil society development in the Middle East.

³² For a review of post-9/11 U.S. democracy promotion initiatives as well as European approaches, see Dalacoura (2005), Sharp (2006), Wittes (2008b), Kopstein (2006), and Yacoubian (2004).

undertake, or refrain from actions they desired to take. Acts of terrorism are generally directed against civilian targets.³³

This definition would include military targets that make a broader political statement (e.g., the attack on the USS *Cole* in Yemen) as acts of terrorism. Other central elements in defining terrorism include the motivations of terrorists, which must be political (i.e., not all crimes are acts of terrorism even if terrorist acts are viewed as criminal). Finally, terrorism is generally carried out in a way that will achieve maximum publicity.

However, in this study, while we draw on such definitions in our data analysis of terrorist incidents, our case studies also take into account other forms of political violence, such as riots or antigovernment protests that may turn violent. While such acts may not be captured in large terrorism data sets, such incidents may still be politically motivated and indicate general trends toward instability and the potential for more extreme and systemic political violence. Our study largely does not address political violence associated with insurgency, although Algeria involves political violence that more closely resembles insurgency than the other cases. While terrorism can certainly be employed as a tactic by insurgents (in addition to guerrilla and more conventional warfare), insurgency and terrorism are distinct concepts, and our study's focus is on the latter.³⁴

The Democracy-Terrorism Debate

Post-9/11 "Draining the Swamp" Logic

While promoting democracy has long been at least a rhetorical element in U.S. foreign policy, the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks significantly elevated the democracy agenda and framed it as a national security

³³ In Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism (2002, p. 4).

³⁴ As one analyst explains the distinction, "Insurgencies combine violence with political programs in pursuit of revolutionary purposes in a way that terrorism cannot duplicate. Terrorists may pursue political, even revolutionary, goals, but their violence replaces rather than complements a political program" (Morris, 2005, p. 2).

imperative. Promoting democracy abroad was no longer viewed as a supplement to other core national security interests; it now became a key national security priority. According to the new logic, the lack of democratization in regions such as the Middle East had fostered repression and extremism by preventing outlets for alternative views and opposition. In other words, U.S. support for regional authoritarian regimes for the sake of stability inadvertently allowed extremism to flourish.

As President Bush argued in one of his most noted speeches on the topic, "Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe. . . . As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment and violence ready for export."³⁵ One Middle East analyst supportive of the Bush administration approach, Reuel Marc Gerecht, suggests that this speech indicated that President Bush rightly understood the problem of "bin Ladenism" as related to the absence of democracy: "bin Ladenism was essentially generated by this perverse nexus between dictatorship and Islamic extremism, both through support and through oppression . . . and the only way you could deconstruct it was to introduce democracy in the Middle East."³⁶ According to Gerecht, allowing democracy to run its course in the region would likely produce undesirable, hostile anti-American leaderships and accelerate anti-Americanism (as well as anti-Zionism/Semitism), but in his assessment, this is "actually good. It's the fever that will break the disease. You have to let it go."³⁷ Repressing or reversing undesired outcomes resulting from democratic processes, such as in the Algeria case in the early 1990s, only produces more, not less, extremism, according to this view.

Natan Sharansky, a former Soviet dissident and currently an Israeli official, was another prominent figure supportive of President Bush's democracy agenda. Sharansky similarly argued that allying with regional dictators resulted in more terrorism and extremism and that

³⁵ Bush (2003).

³⁶ Gerecht (2005).

³⁷ Gerecht (2005).

only the introduction of freedom and democracy to the region would ultimately solve the problem.³⁸ Senior officials within the Bush administration have also argued forcefully in favor of promoting democracy for the sake of regional stability, although they suggest some degree of caution in how the United States goes about promoting such a strategy.³⁹

But it has not just been the Bush administration and its supporters promoting the notion that democracy can serve national security interests. Indeed, the democracy agenda generated bipartisan support and acceptance in the aftermath of 9/11. Martin Indyk, a senior official in various posts in both Clinton administrations, was among the first to lay out the “draining the swamp” logic, suggesting that the United States had made a mistake ignoring political reform in the 1990s while narrowly pursuing Arab-Israeli peacemaking.⁴⁰ Leaders of nonpartisan organizations such as Freedom House also vocally support the notion that democracy promotion can help combat terrorism. As Jennifer L. Windsor argues, “promoting democratization in the closed societies of the Middle East can provide a set of values and ideas that offer a powerful alternative to the appeal of the kind of extremism that today has found expression in terrorist activity.”⁴¹

Academic works have also begun to address the issue of terrorism based on this premise. As one scholar argues in a volume that examines this question in a number of regions, “Terrorism flourishes in autocratic, authoritarian, and totalitarian societies. Such societies provide the economic, religious, ethnic, or regional basis for extremism to develop and terrorism to take root. This would indicate that democ-

³⁸ Sharansky and Dermer (2004). Sharansky and Dermer do not limit their understanding of democracy to political elections. Rather, for the authors, democracy is also about instilling fundamental freedoms, exemplified by what they call the “town square test” of freedom: “Can a person walk into the middle of the town square and express his or her views without fear of arrest, imprisonment or physical harm?” (p. 41). For more on Sharansky’s views, see Sharansky (2005). For a review of Sharansky and Dermer’s book, see Kibble (2006).

³⁹ See, for example, Haass (2003).

⁴⁰ Indyk (2002).

⁴¹ Windsor (2003).

ratization processes, whatever the initial costs, are (in the long run) the best means to eventually alleviate terrorist behavior.⁴² Other studies on terrorism since 9/11 have also pointed to the lack of democracy as one of the most critical underlying causes of extremism.

One psychologist compares the radicalization process of terrorists to floors in a building, suggesting that the social context of repression and political exclusion forms an important part of the foundation for terrorism on the "ground floor": "Closed systems are inefficient, particularly when they are kept in place by brute force. . . . The lack of open competition and circulation in these societies [in the Near and Middle East] breed corruption and inefficiency. In this context, it should not be surprising that many people, particularly the young, experience a strong sense of injustice and despair."⁴³ Using a staircase metaphor, the scholar further argues that although typical counterterrorism measures—more troops, improved technology, effective profiling, and better human intelligence—are part of the solution, they will never fully address terrorism because such policies only target those who have already radicalized (i.e., those on the "highest floors on the staircase to terrorism").⁴⁴ In doing so, such policies "neglect the most important floors on the staircase, the first few floors where the vast majority of the population exists."⁴⁵ In other words, democracy can serve as a *preventive* mechanism against radicalization and ultimately terrorism, according to such scholars.

But while such academic works have begun to move the policy debate beyond assertions regarding the positive effects of democracy, they have not yet fully delineated and explored the causal mechanisms through which such positive effects are to come about. They also have not adequately addressed the limitations and potential dangers of reform processes in regions such as the Middle East, nor have they engaged in

⁴² Crotty (2005).

⁴³ Moghaddam (2006, p. 64).

⁴⁴ Moghaddam (2006, p. 127).

⁴⁵ Moghaddam (2006, p. 127).

sufficient empirical examination of this question.⁴⁶ Indeed, developments in the Middle East since the Iraq war have led to a democracy backlash, with many across the political spectrum now questioning the wisdom of promoting democracy in the region.

The Democracy Backlash

A number of regional developments have contributed to growing uneasiness with the democracy agenda in the Middle East, both within and outside the region.⁴⁷ One element of greater caution is the strong showing of Islamist parties across the region, from HAMAS to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (MB) to Lebanon's Hizballah. Another blow to the democracy agenda has been the instability in Iraq and the violence and sectarian conflict that engulfed that country following elections. Destabilizing regional developments since the Iraq war—as well as growing concerns about rising Iranian power and influence—seem to be leading to a “demotion” rather than promotion of democracy in U.S. regional strategy.⁴⁸ Shoring up support from friendly Sunni Arab regimes to help stabilize Iraq and counter Iran appears to be a greater priority for U.S. policymakers than political reform. In other words, U.S. policy is largely returning to a pre-9/11 posture. As one analyst (and democracy skeptic) summarizes the situation: “The strategic bottom line is clear: Undoing some of the damage in Iraq, so as to block Iranian hegemonic expansion westward and thwart Islamist militants, is far more important for the United States and the Middle East at this juncture in time than persisting with a failed and destructive experiment in democratization.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ An important exception is Hafez (2003). Hafez explores the Algerian and Egyptian cases in depth to support his argument that a combination of political exclusion and reactive repression of Islamist opposition fosters extremism.

⁴⁷ For a broader discussion of concerns over democracy promotion in U.S. national security strategy, see Fukuyama and McFaul (2007–2008).

⁴⁸ See, for example, Cooper (2006), McManus (2006), Shadid (2007), and Exum and Snyder (2007).

⁴⁹ Alpher (2007).

Some scholars have also begun to criticize the democracy agenda by questioning the notion that democracy has anything to do with a reduction in terrorism. One of the most vocal critics has been F. Gregory Gause III, whose 2005 *Foreign Affairs* piece, "Can Democracy Stop Terrorism?" generated significant policy discussion and debate. Gause asks,

Is the security rationale for promoting democracy in the Arab world based on a sound premise? Unfortunately, the answer appears to be no. . . . The data available do not show a strong relationship between democracy and an absence or reduction in terrorism. . . . Nor is it likely that democratization would end the current campaign against the United States. . . . Nor is there any evidence that democracy in the Arab world would "drain the swamp," eliminating soft support for terrorist organizations among the Arab public and reducing the number of potential recruits for them.⁵⁰

Not only does Gause fail to find support for a relationship between democracy and a reduction in terrorism, but he also argues that, if anything, democratic regimes in the Middle East would actually make matters worse. Democracy in the Middle East would likely "produce new Islamist governments that would be much less willing to cooperate with the United States than are the current authoritarian rulers."⁵¹

Gause's piece makes an important contribution to the policy debate in that he challenges conventional assertions that have not been adequately supported with analytic reasoning and empirical evidence. His critique also usefully questions the underlying premise concerning the strategic logic of democracy promotion. Gause is right to suggest that if the United States is to launch a major foreign policy initiative, the underlying rationale for such a policy should be sound. In his view, it is not. So even if regional developments appeared more favorable, Gause's critique would still suggest democracy promotion may be a

⁵⁰ Gause (2005).

⁵¹ Gause (2005).

waste of time, perhaps even harmful, at least from a security perspective (he does not question the moral premise of this policy).

Is Gause right? Or is he asking the wrong question? Is his critique any more analytically sound and empirically grounded than the theory he is trying to debunk? Indeed, there are several flaws in Gause's critique. Both the academic literature he cites as well as the anecdotal evidence he draws on could lead to a fundamentally different conclusion, or at least a more ambivalent one.

Gause acknowledges that academic studies of democracy-terrorism links are limited and incomplete, but still asserts, "even these [studies] seem to discredit the supposedly close link between terrorism and authoritarianism." The first study he cites, by William Eubank and Leonard Weinberg, unequivocally finds that not only is terrorism more likely to occur in mature democracies, but that the terrorist perpetrators are more likely to come from democracies than any other type of political system.⁵² But the other study Gause cites, by Quan Li—which draws on much more comprehensive data than the Eubank and Weinberg study—suggests a more ambiguous picture.⁵³ While Li also finds that terrorism is more likely to occur in democracies (in large part because of the institutional constraints that make it easier for terrorists to operate in more open societies), he also finds that democratic participation can reduce terrorist incidents: "It increases satisfaction and political efficacy of citizens, reduces their grievances, thwarts terrorist recruitment, and raises public tolerance of counterterrorist policies."⁵⁴ While Gause also cites Robert Pape's work to illustrate the greater frequency of terrorism in democracies—according to Pape suicide terrorists are more likely to target democracies because their central agenda is about ending foreign military occupations⁵⁵—what matters more for

⁵² Eubank and Weinberg (2001).

⁵³ Like Eubank and Weinberg, Li (2005) draws on the ITERATE (International Terrorism: Attributes and Terrorist Events) database, but his sample of 119 countries spans from 1975 to 1997 (Eubank and Weinberg only draw on data from 1980 to 1987).

⁵⁴ Li (2005).

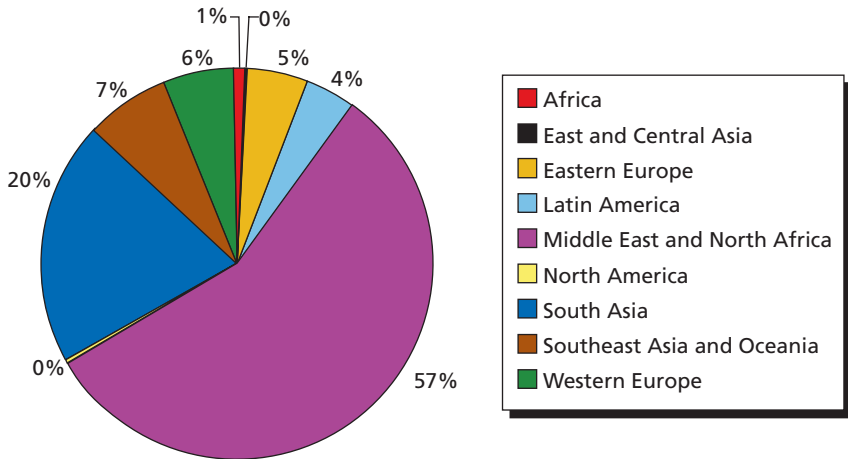
⁵⁵ Pape (2005).

the democracy-terrorism question is where the terrorists *originate*, not just where they strike.

Thus, one of Gause’s central critiques of the “democracy reduces terrorism” thesis—that terrorism occurs more often in democracies (e.g., India) than in authoritarian systems (e.g., China)—misses the point. As noted above, there is broad support in the scholarly literature to date about the greater prevalence of terrorist acts in democracies, and many anecdotal examples can easily support this finding. That said, recent terrorism data following the Iraq war challenges this assumption, as Figure 1.1 suggests—the majority of terrorist incidents after 2003 are occurring in largely undemocratic regions.

But even if we accept that terrorism is more likely to occur in democracies, this critique confuses cause and effect. If we are to understand the absence of democracy as one of the potential underlying causal factors leading to terrorism, we must examine where the perpetrators of terrorism come from, not just where they decide it is best from a tactical perspective to carry out their terrorist acts. In this respect, and in contrast to Eubank and Weinberg, Alan Krueger and

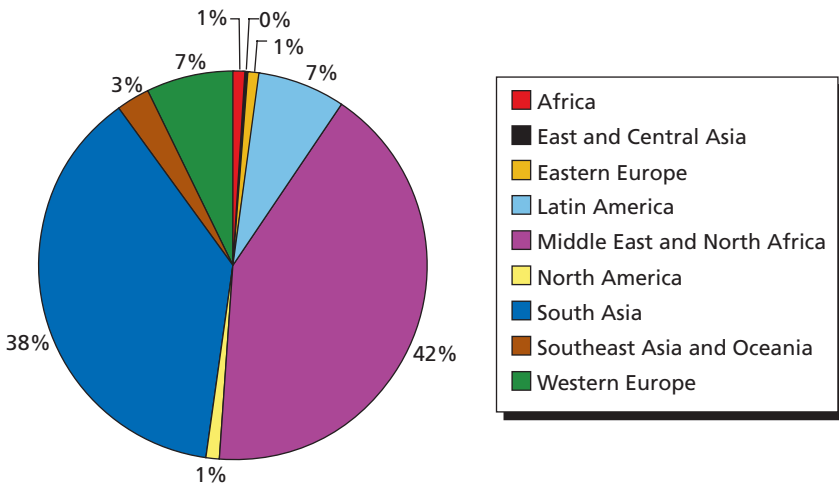
Figure 1.1
Terrorism Incidents, by Region, from the End of Combat Operations in Iraq (May 1, 2003) to December 31, 2006



David Laitin, find that while terrorist targets are more economically developed and democratic, terrorists are coming largely from repressive, undemocratic societies, and that the sources of terrorism seem to be more related to repression than to poverty.⁵⁶ As they explain their findings, “countries that afford a low level of political rights are more likely to be the springboards of terrorism and less likely to be the targets of terrorism.”⁵⁷ Drawing on the RAND-MIPT terrorism database, we also find some preliminary evidence to support this view, as shown in Figure 1.2.

Is it just a coincidence that the majority of terrorism seems to come from the least democratic regions in the world? At the very least, we have reason to be much more cautious than Gause in dismissing the moderating effects of democracy. One final limitation of Gause’s critique is that it does not adequately distinguish between different types of terrorist groups, particularly as they relate to the Middle East. For

Figure 1.2
Percentage of Claimed Terrorist Incidents by Regional Base of Operations, May 1, 2003, to December 31, 2006



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⁵⁶ Krueger and Laitin (2008).

⁵⁷ Krueger and Laitin (2008).

Gause and other democracy skeptics, the group that receives the most attention is al-Qa'ida, and for obvious reasons. To be sure, al-Qa'ida and other groups affiliated with Salafi jihadi ideology⁵⁸ are arguably the greatest terrorist threat to U.S. and Western interests, so it is only fair to consider the effects of democracy on such groups. And it may well be true, as Gause and others argue, that political reforms will have no effect on these types of transnational actors because they have already checked out of their respective political systems. If anything, such groups will only be further galvanized to stop democratization, because they view democracy as a deviant Western system used to challenge Muslim identity. As Douglas Borer and Michael Freeman argue, the spread of democracy is irrelevant to al-Qa'ida's goals and grievances, which include perceived foreign occupation of Muslim lands and a desire to restore Shari'a law and the caliphate over the entirety of the Islamic world.⁵⁹

But what about domestic-based groups that have not yet checked out of the political system? Or resistance groups with more local objectives? Can reform efforts affect these groups differently? And what about the possibility that repressive and exclusive state policies may lead local groups to radicalize and support (or even merge with) transnational, al-Qa'ida-linked groups? Can we completely separate al-Qa'ida from more local, domestic groups in the region? And finally, even if reform processes have no effect on transnational groups themselves, can reforms delegitimize such groups among the populations in which they operate? In cases such as Saudi Arabia, for example, politi-

⁵⁸ Broadly defined, Salafism is a strand of Sunni Islam that seeks to emulate, in all spheres of human activity, the example of the "pious predecessors" (*al-Salaf al-Salih*)—the Prophet Muhammad, his companions, and the first three generations of his followers. Salafism's doctrinal tenets include scriptural orthodoxy based on the Qur'an and hadith, a focus on the unity of God (*tawhid*), an abstention from innovation (*bid'a*) in religious practice and an aversion to polytheism (*shirk*). In practice, Salafism posits a universalized and highly idealized "culture-free" form of Islam that has proven attractive to certain disaffected population segments.

⁵⁹ Borer and Freeman (2007). For similar arguments critical of democracy promotion as a strategic element of U.S. policy, see Freeman (2008). These scholars do concede, however, that democracy may have more of an effect on other types of terrorist actors with more national or territorial objectives.

cal reform has helped generate societal support for counterterrorism measures against extremist groups.

Studies of other types of terrorist groups in other regional settings suggest that liberalization measures can have a moderating influence and delegitimize terrorism among the broader population even if it cannot completely eradicate the terrorists themselves. For example, in a case study of Basque separatists (represented by the terrorist organization Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) operating during Spain's democratic transition from 1975 to 1992, scholars find that the government's inclusive policies to address Basque grievances bolstered its legitimacy and thus marginalized the ETA over time.⁶⁰ The study finds that although political violence increased as Spain developed more robust democratic practices, support for the ETA steadily declined and opposition groups rejected violence to achieve their political goals as the government gave Basque parties, leaders, and people a stake in the democratic system.⁶¹

Can such effects play out in a region such as the Middle East, where the conditions for democracy are significantly less ripe than the case of Spain, and where the regional context is a destabilizing rather than stabilizing force?⁶² Some scholars are beginning to examine Middle East cases based on this distinction between local and transnational terrorist actors, recognizing that the limited focus on al-Qa'ida does not fully address the potential effects of even more limited reform efforts in this region. Indeed, Paul Pillar argues that the effects of political reform will depend in large part on the type of terrorist group under discussion,

⁶⁰ See Chapter One, "The Basques in Spain and Repercussions in France: Case I," in Jebb et al., (2006).

⁶¹ Jebb et al., (2006).

⁶² In *The Fight for Legitimacy* (2006), Jebb et al. also raise this question and consider other cases in less favorable contexts, including the Kurds in Turkey, Albanians in Macedonia, Russia, and Chechnya, and Palestinians and Israelis. Still, while acknowledging the greater challenges in other contexts, the study ultimately concludes that democratization is a fundamental element of counterterrorism: "A core assumption of this study is that combating terrorism and promoting democracy are not mutually exclusive goals, even in unstable transitional polities. . . . Security and liberty need not be locked in a zero-sum struggle for control of the political agenda of a transitional regime" (p. 1).

and are likely to have a more moderating influence on groups that have a chance to win support and power through democratic means (e.g., HAMAS or the MB branches in Egypt and Jordan) than those groups less likely to abide by democratic norms (e.g., al-Qa'ida).⁶³ Mohammed Hafez suggests that more accessible political systems will lead to more moderate and accommodationist positions among opposition groups in the Islamic world, and vice versa (depending in his view on levels of repression by the state).⁶⁴ This explains why, in Hafez's analysis, Algeria developed into a perfect storm for terrorism: thwarted political inclusion combined with reactive state repression.

Katerina Dalacoura usefully distinguishes between three different types of terrorist actors in her study of terrorism and democracy in the Middle East: transnational terrorism of al-Qa'ida, Islamist terrorism linked to national liberation movements (e.g., HAMAS and Hizballah), and Islamist terrorism related to domestic insurgencies (e.g., Egyptian Gama'a Islamiyya or the Algerian Armed Islamic Group).⁶⁵ However, she finds the links between political inclusion and terrorism to be ambiguous in all cases, including those groups operating in a domestic context. In some cases, exclusionary policies by states led to terrorism (e.g., Egypt) while in other cases it did not (e.g., Tunisia). As she concludes, "there is no conclusive evidence of a necessary causal link between the democratic deficit in the Middle East and Islamist terrorism."⁶⁶ In other words, because there is so much variation between levels of political inclusion and terrorism (i.e., in some cases terrorism increases with political reforms, in others it decreases), she suggests we cannot make a determination about a definite relationship between democracy and terrorism.

However, not only is her empirical examination limited, but she, like Gause, may be asking the wrong question. What may be more significant than finding a definitive correlation between democracy and

⁶³ Pillar (2008).

⁶⁴ Hafez (2003 and 2005).

⁶⁵ Dalacoura (2006).

⁶⁶ Dalacoura (2006, p. 522).

terrorism, or as Paul Pillar puts it, a “new grand social science law,”⁶⁷ would be to assess whether, how, and under what conditions reform efforts might be affecting calculations regarding political violence, positively or negatively, over time and in different contexts.

Democracy-Terrorism Hypotheses

Based on the literature outlined above, we have identified several hypotheses regarding the relationship between democracy and terrorism, which we will then apply to the more limited reform efforts that are apparent across our case studies from the region. We recognize, however, that empirical assessments of these hypotheses in cases of functioning democracies may produce different results. The hypotheses relate to the following areas:

1. *Norms*: Democracy fosters positive attitudes and values (e.g., tolerance and respect for opposing opinions and minority groups) that will steer people away from extremism and political violence. Just as in the case of normative approaches to democratic peace theory, the “live and let live” normative framework that democratic systems generate will lead to more tolerant and peaceful behavior.
2. *Institutions*: Democratic systems can address grievances and power imbalances related to political repression and exclusion, giving all actors a stake in the system. Democratic institutions (such as competitive political parties and elections) provide an outlet for all citizens, including minority groups, to voice and address their grievances through nonviolent means and allow for authentic power sharing among different societal groups. Other democratic institutional mechanisms that foster such a pacifying effect include referenda, plebiscites, confederations, and limited-autonomy agreements that can provide nonviolent solutions to address minority grievances.
3. *Legitimacy*: Democracy can enhance the legitimacy of the state and therefore reduce support and recruitment for terrorist net-

⁶⁷ Pillar (2008).

works. According to this logic, even if the terrorist networks themselves are not affected by national political openings, the enhanced legitimacy a democratic process provides to the governing regime and state system will dampen support and even delegitimize terrorism among the wider population. As Jebb et al. argue, "The ultimate determinant of the struggle between nascent democracy and violent extremism is how successful either side is in generating political legitimacy. . . . The democratizing regime must foster policies that generate legitimacy among disaffected groups within the population."⁶⁸

4. *Destabilization*: Democratization in transitional societies can be destabilizing, and can lead to more, not less, political violence. The negative effects may emerge across all types of rationales outlined above. In other words, incomplete and transitional democratization processes can produce exclusive rather than inclusive norms, may create institutional imbalance and political exclusion of key political actors, and may lead the public to view the system as less, not more, legitimate. This destabilization logic stems from Mansfield and Snyder's thesis about the greater likelihood of transitional democracies to go to war because state institutions are absent or weak, leaving more incentives for leaders to resort to violent national appeals and repression, particularly if governing elites feel threatened by premature democratic processes (e.g., elections). Extending this logic to terrorism would suggest that the greater repression brought about through destabilizing democratic transitions would be more likely to produce higher levels of political violence in response. Indeed, Mansfield and Snyder argue that quick democratic transitions in the Islamic world are likely to lead to more violence and that "democratizing the Arab states is a major gamble in the war on terror."⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Jebb et al. (2006, p. 2).

⁶⁹ Mansfield and Snyder (2005, p. 278).

Empirical Application to the Arab World: Case Selection and Methods

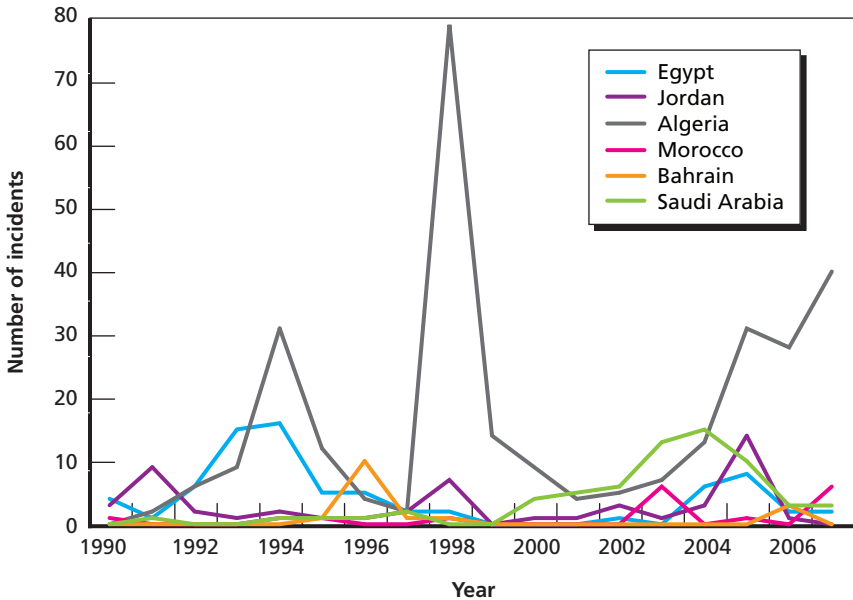
We adapt the above hypotheses to empirically explore the effects of political reform processes in six Arab case studies, in large part because the extremism that produced 9/11 and most directly influenced this policy debate came from this part of the Muslim world. Naturally, we would encourage future work to explore other cases in the Muslim world and other regions, including regions that have functioning democracies. But limiting our cases to the Arab world also helped us control—at least to some extent—for cultural and political differences and to generate more region and case-specific policy prescriptions that are relevant and useful.

In terms of the case selection within the Arab world, we had several criteria. First, we wanted our cases to reflect variation both on levels of reform and levels of terrorism, across time and place. As Figures 1.3 and 1.4 illustrate, our cases illustrate such variation over the 15-year time period we cover (1991 to 2006).⁷⁰

We also selected cases from different subregions within the Arab world (the Levant, the Maghreb, and the Gulf) where at least one of the countries is viewed as a major regional player. Finally, we did not choose cases that are complicated by ongoing or recent hot wars and foreign occupation (e.g., Palestine, Lebanon, or Iraq), as it would be more difficult in such cases to discern the effects of political reforms as opposed to other factors that could be fostering extremism (e.g., Arab-Israeli conflict, sectarian conflict). That said, it appears obvious that the Iraq war is not only complicating the internal dynamics within that country but is also having a broader regional spillover effect on reform processes across the region. Still, despite the destabilizing regional context of Arab-Israeli violence and the Iraq war, the cases we explore in

⁷⁰ It is important to note that the data on terrorist incidents drawn from the RAND-MIPT database only accounts for international terrorism until 1998; after 1998, the database began including information on both international and domestic incidents. Consequently, the levels of terrorism before 1998 reflected in the data likely underrepresents the levels of terrorism taking place in the Arab cases covered in the study. That said, the type of data drawn on for all cases in the study is consistent.

Figure 1.3
Total Number of Terrorist Incidents for Case Study Countries, 1990–2006



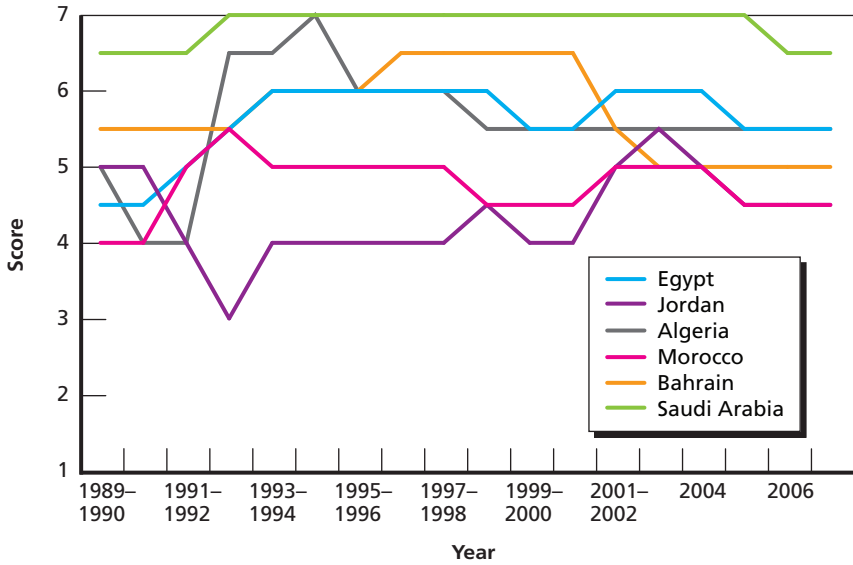
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the following chapters illustrate dynamics more independent of these conflicts.

To make assessments regarding the effects of reform processes on terrorism and political violence, the following case chapters all rely on extensive fieldwork in each country. Collectively, we interviewed over 130 experts in the region (analysts, officials, journalists, military personnel, academics, and activists). Some authors also observed election rallies, political debates, and other civic forums. We also drew on extensive secondary literature and primary source materials (such as surveys), including Arabic sources.

After reviewing both liberalization and terrorism trends in each country, each chapter subsequently turns to an assessment of potential correlations between the two based on quantitative data. The case chapters then address the various effects of reforms through a deeper empirical examination, assessing how the various hypotheses presented in this introductory chapter play out in these cases of more limited and

Figure 1.4
Freedom House Scores for Case Study Countries, 1989/1990–2006



NOTE: A score of 1 indicates the highest degree of freedom, and 7 the least.

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controlled liberalization processes. The concluding chapter summarizes the case study findings and suggests recommendations for U.S. policy.