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US Aid in the Arab World

Fact Checking US Democratization Rhetoric Against Reality

Nicholas A. Canfield

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Abstract:

Many factors have been used to explain durable authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and one of the most important external influences of MENA governments' structure is support from the United States. The US balances security concerns and democratization rhetoric in the region, but much literature promotes that security concerns are the most important factor for US support in MENA. Using US aid as a proxy for US support, this study finds that US aid actually increases democratization in MENA, and counterintuitively, aid to MENA military and police forces seems to have a stronger democratization effect than US aid to MENA economic sectors. Comparing US aid with other democratization variables, this study supports that other MENA factors such as oil rents and civil society are more impactful on their levels of democracy than US aid.

Keywords: US aid, Authoritarianism, Democracy, Middle East, North Africa, Military, Oil Rentierism

Introduction

Dictators in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have held a tight grip over their countries' political and economic realities throughout the past century. These authoritarian governments have controlled their populations and limited their people's civil rights through some very influential carrots and sticks. Given a global movement towards democratization, one would presume that these repressive governments would eventually become overwhelmed by their people demanding for more freedom; however, this has not been the case. Perplexed by this phenomenon, many scholars have attempted to tackle the following puzzles: what has caused durable authoritarianism in MENA, and what are factors that move countries to more democratic systems of government?

Many internal explanations of why MENA authoritarianism has persisted have been well researched and supported by historical evidence, but the most convincing one places the blame on an external factor outside of the MENA region. Although the US is one of the largest champions of democracy promotion, it has shown strong support of MENA authoritarianism throughout the past century. It is clear that monetary and political support from the US has been a large cause of continued repressive governments in this and many other regions across the globe. The US has many tools in its foreign policy toolbox, and one it frequently utilizes in the MENA region is foreign aid.

Foreign aid can be earmarked for reasons such as specific economic assistance, but some is also provided as direct assistance to MENA military and police forces. Intuitively, when the US sends large shipments of US foreign aid to bankroll various projects in MENA countries, this indicates high levels of US Governmental support for MENA authoritarian governments. Although at face value this appears to support authoritarianism, some believe that administering

foreign aid could play a part in subversive measures towards moving these countries away from authoritarianism and towards democracy.

The US walks a fine line between its security concerns and democratization rhetoric in the MENA region. As former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in a talk about the threat of ISIS,

“To impose the toughest sanctions in history on Iran, to stop a dictator from slaughtering his people in Libya, to support a fledgling democracy in Afghanistan, we have to use every pillar of American power — military and diplomacy, development and economic and cultural influence, technology and maybe most importantly our values.” (Beckwith, 2015)

It is clear from these comments that US idealism favors democracy over dictatorship, but within the same sentence it is also clear that no option is off the table. Democratization rhetoric might only be empty words if not thoroughly backed by action that supports it, and US foreign policy could be seen as favoring MENA regional security over democratization efforts. Given that foreign aid is an important US foreign policy instrument which could potentially favor MENA democratization efforts over US security concerns, politicians should pay close attention to the effects of US aid on these outcomes. Given the sheer amount of money involved, US policymakers need to know if administering money to these governments can effectively and efficiently fulfil US foreign policy. More importantly, we as a country need to check if our morals are being supported by our tax dollars. Simply stated, we need to look into the black box and ask: does US foreign aid support cold harsh authoritarianism over our democratic ideals?

This study hypothesizes that US foreign aid has a significant role in increasing authoritarianism in the MENA region; however, when US aid is divided into two categories of “economic aid” and “military / police aid”, economic aid should move MENA countries away from authoritarianism while military/police aid will move them towards it. To test these

hypotheses, multiple statistical regression models will be run to test the effects of US foreign aid per capita on MENA countries' authoritarianism. Other influential arguments which have dominated the discourse on durable authoritarianism and democratization in the MENA region will be analyzed to test each arguments' comparative strengths against each other. From a quick check any cable news channel, it is clear to see that this research is timely and important to American politics as ever. This study advises that given our trajectory of administering foreign aid to the region, constantly updating our knowledge of US foreign policy efforts and outcomes in the MENA region is critical to maintaining US global soft and hard power.

If US foreign aid is shown to increase MENA authoritarianism, this can paint a clearer picture of how US foreign intervention has helped MENA authoritarianism flourish. Such a finding should also push democratizers to call for reduced US foreign aid in order to increase MENA countries' chances at democratization. With the billions of dollars that the US Government has given to this region, US taxpayers have the right to know the results of such foreign expenditures, and MENA citizens calling for democracy should know how they can push their countries away from political repression and towards extended liberties. Perhaps the US is using economic aid to bolster its democratization rhetoric and military aid to enhance its security interests, and determining the effects of each type of aid will help analyze US democratization rhetoric in the face of reality. Although many arguments have been thoroughly discussed in past literature, this study will attempt to consolidate the main arguments which have been posited in the durable authoritarianism and democratization literatures.

Literature Review

Durable Authoritarianism and Democratization

It is hard to find democracies in the MENA region other than Israel and the newest addition of Tunisia. Even in the face of a wave of democratization after the fall of the Soviet Union (Huntington, 1993), dictators have held strong grips on their countries by shutting down protests and democratic reform efforts through force and influence. Bellin (2004) argues that MENA states have been able to repress democratization efforts and maintain robust authoritarianism because of the strength of their coercive apparatuses. MENA militaries, police, and other security forces are heavily funded with state income from oil rents, and these entities are strongly tied to those in power via patrimonial lines which gives leaders almost absolute control over them. Military expenditures, which are quite high in the MENA region, are an important factor that keeps MENA dictators firmly in power (Bellin, 2004). Other scholars point to more structural and civil society factors which have limited MENA democratic efforts, and some also demonstrate the negative effects of oil rentierism on democracy.

MENA states have used their large supplies of oil to fund their governments and spur economic growth, but this use has been shown to have limiting effects on democracy. Ross (2001) supports that heavily relying on oil has a negative effect on supporting democracy because of many effects including rentierism (low citizen tax rates reduce government accountability towards the public), repression (funding security efforts to crush protest), and modernization (reducing industrial and service sectors which lead to democracy). Oil has funded many anti-democratic efforts, but some take a more controversial claim that the Islamic faith is incongruent with democracy.

Some studies support that the presence of the Islamic faith has had a negative impact on democratization in the MENA region (Rowley & Smith, 2009; Potrafke, 2012). Rowley and

Smith (2009) claim that the nature of Islam itself has been said to drive countries away from democracy perhaps through its restricting properties on religious discourse, but they heavily caution scholars from drawing causality from these correlations. Ross (2001) claims that there is a collinearity problem between Islam and other variables in the MENA region because there is not much variation in the Muslim percentages between many MENA countries; therefore, establishing a causal link is perhaps ill-advised. Also, because of the existence of multiple democratic countries with majority Muslim populations like Indonesia and Malaysia, this link seems to be quite problematic. In addition to Islam being a potential democratic deterrent, civil society and wealth arguments have also been used to explain the lack of democracy in MENA.

Modernization theory predicts that wealth will create values congruent with democracy that will create more demand for democratic governments and institutions (Lipset, 1959; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Brownlee et al. (2015) demonstrate in *The Arab Spring: Pathways of Repression and Reform* that structural factors such as GDP/capita predicted the democratization efforts during the Arab Spring quite well. MENA countries have low GDP/capita values when oil revenues are not included, and it is argued that this lack of individual wealth has maintained MENA authoritarianism (Ross, 2001). Combining wealth with other civil society factors, Knack (2004) found that both economic growth and higher literacy rates lead to democracy. Given that literacy rates and education levels are low in MENA, scholars state that calls for democracy have remained low because MENA citizens do not have the civil society base on which to build democratic institutions (Bellin, 2004). Although all of these arguments have been tested and seem to be relatively strong, many scholars have pointed to the negative influence of US policy and security interests on democratization in MENA.

US Foreign Policy and MENA Democratization

Democracy promotion has been one of the largest focuses of US foreign policy in MENA especially after September 11th 2001, but the results of democracy promotion in light of US security concerns have been ambiguous (Dalacoura, 2005). This can be attributed to the US administering foreign aid in MENA to increase its political goals, such as making aid recipients vote congruently with the US in the UN (Alesina & Dollar, 2000), instead of creating better outcomes for MENA people and governments (Maizels, & Nissanke, 1984). Although most scholars admit that US aid rarely values aid-recipients' considerations more than US security concerns, studies show mixed results of the effects of foreign aid on democratization.

Some scholars state that US aid increases authoritarianism by allowing dictators to reduce the opportunities for revolutionaries to coordinate by using little to none of their core revenue stream (De Mesquita & Smith, 2010). Carapico (2002) supports that foreign aid to MENA did not lead to democratization and could have increased authoritarianism in these countries. Others claim that foreign aid has little to no effect on increasing democratic levels of countries (Knack, 2004; Alesina & Dollar, 2000). When MENA countries have moved towards democracy, this has been only to appeal to western aid donors and businesses as a way to increase their US aid and international favorable perceptions (Carapico, 2002). Contrasting these pessimistic results, some scholars are quite optimistic about the prospect of US foreign aid leading to MENA democratization.

Although foreign aid has the potential to be used in multiple aspects, conditional aid earmarks the use of foreign aid to specific projects and has been shown to increase democratization movements by authoritarian regimes. Aid has been shown to only be effective if leaders can expect to remain in office after democratization occurs, and aid given to dictators

with large distributional coalitions and good chances at winning fair elections has also been shown to lead to democracy (Wright, 2009). Receiving democracy aid, money used to aid countries in transitioning to democracy, has been shown to decrease the risk of conflict and play a positive role during times of breaking away from authoritarianism to democracy (Savun & Tirone, 2011). Sometimes global political structures can influence the effects of foreign aid. Meernik et al. (1998) support that before the Cold War democracy and US foreign aid were negatively correlated, but after the Cold War aid started to increase democratic efforts in receiving countries. Also, some US foreign aid has been shown to be more effective than others. When US aid is split into democracy aid and economic aid, democracy aid shows a positive effect on democratization while economic aid does not (Scott & Steele, 2011). As shown, the current literature shown some prospect for conditional aid to lead towards democratization; however, much literature still supports that aid enhances durable authoritarianism.

In light of the multiple democratization theories and disagreement on the potential of US foreign aid, this study will attempt to synthesize these multiple theories while attempting to show how US foreign aid does have an impact on MENA authoritarianism depending on its aid type. Also, there seems to be a current lack in the literature discussing the impact of US aid administered to MENA militaries and police forces which could help bolster their durable authoritarianism. This study will attempt to show that although US aid is supporting authoritarianism in the MENA region, economic aid goes against this effort while military aid supports it.

Methodology

A statistical control method will be used to demonstrate the effects of US aid on authoritarianism in MENA. Because US aid is not the only variable that can affect the outcome of a country's system of government, this study will account for multiple other theories by including other democratization control variables in the analyses. 18 MENA countries are included in the analysis¹. The unit of analysis is country-year with one year lagged independent and control variables. Because of the limitations of US aid reporting, the study will range from 2001 to 2014 which includes the time of democratization movements during the Arab Uprisings. A robust linear regression will be conducted utilizing 95% confidence intervals to test the significance of each variable on authoritarian outcomes.

Dependent Variable: Authoritarianism

There are multiple ways which authoritarianism can be operationalized, yet one frequent measure that is typically used and supported is Freedom House. Freedom House scores are separated into two categories: civil liberties and political rights. Each category ranges from 1 (most free) to 7 (least free), however for the purposes of this study, the scale will be a democracy-authoritarian continuum between 1 “most democratic” and 7 “most authoritarian”. In addition to each category being a dependent variable, a summation of the two ranging from 2 “most democratic” to 14 “most authoritarian” will also be utilized. Hence, the three dependent variables which all represent authoritarianism are as follows: 1) civil liberties, 2) political rights, and 3) authoritarianism. Each dependent variable will be from the year after the listed country-year ranging from 2002 to 2015 in order to establish a time-order causality from the independent variables.

¹ MENA countries were chosen according to the categorization done by Freedom House. They were also dependent on available data from all sources used. The countries are Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

Independent Variable: US Foreign Aid

This study hypothesizes that not all US foreign aid types to MENA have the same effects on authoritarianism, but total US aid received will have a positive and significant impact on authoritarianism. Specifically, aid given to MENA militaries and police should increase authoritarianism while aid given to economic endeavors should create more democratic MENA governments. Therefore, three US foreign aid variables will be utilized in this study: economic aid, military aid, and total aid. Economic aid and total aid should show significant and negative effects on authoritarianism, and military aid is hypothesized to have a significant and positive effect on authoritarianism.

US foreign aid will be operationalized as the disbursements in hundreds of dollars listed by USAID from 2001 to 2014 (economic and military) given to each MENA country. These values will be divided by each country's year population to standardize the measure between countries. The summation of the economic aid/capita and military aid/capita will create the total aid variable. The effects of US foreign aid will be controlled by a list of variables identified as pertinent to MENA authoritarianism by previous literature.

Control Variables

Previous literature has shown that military expenditures, literacy, education, wealth, oil, and Islam can explain the persistence of authoritarianism in MENA. Military expenditures will be operationalized as the percent of central government expenditure on military. Literacy will be the literacy rate of a country's people ages 15 and above. Education will be the percent of labor force with secondary education. GDP/capita in hundreds of dollars in constant 2005 USD will represent wealth. The oil variable will be the oil rents as a percent of GDP, and Islam will be the percent of the total population that is Muslim. These variables along with the main independent

variables of US aid will attempt to explain the variation in authoritarian outcomes in MENA, and the results show interesting findings.

Results

As predicted, total US aid received by MENA countries has a significant effect on their authoritarianism; however, it is opposite to what was expected. As demonstrated in Table 1, the amount of total US aid that MENA countries receive has a negative effect on authoritarianism. Simply stated, receiving more US foreign aid causes MENA countries to become more democratic. When looking at political rights and civil liberties separately, US aid shows a significant effect on creating more democratic political rights only when military expenditures and oil are not held constant. US aid, however, does show consistent and slight pushes towards democratic civil liberties even when MENA countries military expenditures and civil society factors are held constant. For every \$100/capita that a MENA country receives in US aid, they decrease their authoritarianism score by almost a full point. Although US total aid appears to create more democratic MENA governments, other economic and civil society factors within MENA countries such as oil rentierism and efforts to increase literacy have stronger impacts on democratic outcomes. Not surprisingly, oil rents support authoritarianism, but what should come as a slight shock are the supportive effects of literacy towards authoritarianism. Overall, the results seem to support that US democratization efforts are triumphing over security concerns through administering foreign aid to MENA countries, and because of this, one could say that foreign aid overall seems to be a strong tool at influencing outcomes in the region. When US aid is split into its two categories of economic and military aid, some interesting results are observed.

Table 1: Effects of US Aid on MENA Authoritarianism

	Authoritarianism				Political Rights		Civil Liberties	
	M-1	M-2	M-3	M-4	M-5	M-6	M-7	M-8
US Aid	-0.96***	-0.73***	-1.23***	-0.90***	-0.66***	-0.65***	-0.30**	-0.22***
Military Expenditures	0.08	0.02	0.05		0.07**		0.00	0.00
Literacy	0.05***	0.03***	0.04***	0.05***	0.02***	0.03***	0.03***	
Wealth	-0.01*		-0.01***	-0.01*	-0.00**	-0.00*	-0.00	-0.00
Oil	0.04**	0.03***	0.05***	0.04***	0.01		0.02***	0.03***
Education	-0.01		-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.02	0.00	
Islam	3.35***	5.05***		3.17**	1.75**	2.28***	1.60***	1.49***
Constant	3.81**	3.08**	7.51***	4.02**	2.48**	1.90*	1.33*	3.37***
N	176	216	176	176	176	176	176	216
Adj R-squared	0.64	0.6	0.61	0.63	0.63	0.61	0.59	0.57

Note²: Regression coefficients listed. P-value significance levels indicated by *<.05, **<.01, ***<.001. Excluding Israel from M-1 showed no change in the significance levels nor coefficient directions.

Table 2: US Economic and Military Aid on MENA Authoritarianism

	Authoritarianism				Political Rights		Civil Liberties		
	M-1	M-1/Is	M-2	M-3	M-4	M-5	M-6	M-7	M-8
Economic Aid	-0.05	-1.10*	0.30	0.02	0.20	0.09	-0.13	-0.15	0.02
Military Aid	-1.26***	-0.16	-1.32***	-1.21***	-1.57***	-0.91***	-0.83***	-0.36**	-0.35***
Military Expenditures	0.07	0.09	0.05		0.06	0.07*		0.00	0.00
Literacy	0.03**	0.04**		0.04**	0.02*	0.01	0.02***	0.02***	
Wealth	-0.01*	-0.00**	-0.00	-0.01*	-0.01**	-0.00**	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00
Oil	0.04***	0.04**	0.04***	0.05***	0.06***	0.02*		0.03***	0.03***
Education	0.00	0.01		0.00	0.00	0.00	-0.01	0.00	
Islam	2.54*	0.39	2.41*	2.35		1.08	1.93**	1.46**	1.21**
Constant	5.18***	6.77***	7.84***	5.41***	8.21***	3.62***	2.55**	1.57*	3.59***
N	176	162	216	176	176	176	176	176	216
Adj R-squared	0.64	0.21	0.61	0.64	0.63	0.65	0.62	0.58	0.57

Note²: Regression coefficients listed. P-value significance levels indicated by *<.05, **<.01, ***<.001. M-1/Is is a model ran without including Israel.

² A variance in inflation (VIF) check indicated no multicollinearity problem. No cases were found to be influential outliers. Because of observed heteroscedasticity, robust standard errors were used in all regressions.

When US aid is disaggregated into its two forms, military aid shows significant and negative effects on authoritarianism. When a MENA country receives \$100/capita more in military aid, it decreases its authoritarianism score by about 1.26. This supports that as MENA militaries receive more US aid, they increasingly lead their countries to become more democratic. Negating the original hypothesis of economic aid creating more democratization, US economic aid shows no significant effect and lasting impact on authoritarianism. However, when Israel is not included in the model, this flips; military aid shows no effect on democratization and economic aid shows strong positive effects on democratization when Israel is not included in the picture. Combining the impact of US foreign aid along with other democratization and durable authoritarianism theories, the implications of these findings are astounding.

Discussion

Those in the civil society camp which tout the power of literacy and education at creating democratic governments should be quite saddened by these results. Education seems to hold no power at creating more democratic governments in MENA, and quite contrary to what was hypothesized, more literacy seems to push towards more authoritarian governments. For those who have attempted to establish that Islam is incompatible with democracy, this study finds support that Islam enhances the authoritarianism of MENA countries. Unsurprisingly, oil rentierism supports MENA authoritarianism and reduces democratic outcomes, and this supports prior literature by scholars such as Ross (2001). For those in the modernization camp emphasizing the importance of wealth in creating democratic governments, this study supports that wealth has an extremely small, and perhaps meaningless, effect on creating democracies in

MENA when compared to the effects of US aid. The durable authoritarianism literature emphasizing well financed security apparatuses will find nuanced results from this study. Increases in MENA military spending do create more authoritarian political rights, but the effects on civil liberties and authoritarianism as a whole are not supported. Finally, this study shows support for the literature of US democracy promotion through foreign aid.

Although some might say that US aid is a way to enhance US security concerns in the region by promoting authoritarianism, it would appear that US foreign aid actually supports democracy promotion congruent with US democratization rhetoric. Military aid, while on the surface bolstering MENA authoritarianism, actually seems to increase democracy in the region. Even though no cases were influential outliers, removing Israel from the analysis reverses the power of each form of aid: economic aid significantly leads to democracy while military aid does not. This finding leads to more support for the original hypotheses of this study, and can be explained by looking at the relationship between Israel and the US.

Israel is a small country and receives much the most US foreign aid per capita due to its special relationship security relationship with the US. Because the country has high democracy scores and high US aid levels, this definitely influences the results as shown above. Economic aid dominates the democratization effects when Israel is removed from the analysis, and this more coincides with the original hypotheses of this study; however, even when Israel is excluded, this study finds no support that US military aid leads to more durable authoritarianism. These findings lead to interesting policy implications for both MENA governments and the US.

Because it is safe to assume MENA dictators want to stay in power, they should reconsider the short-term gains of US aid funding their military/police forces and switch to more long-term focuses on increasing their oil production. As a more nuanced strategy at maintaining

power, and perhaps quite counterintuitive, MENA governments should also attempt to increase literacy rates as a way to hold back democratization movements. Finally, given that democracy promotion seems to be congruent with administering aid, the US should increase its aid if it wants to see more examples of Tunisia and Israel in the region. Given that economic aid appears to be less of a factor than military aid, democracy promotion can be achieved through aid to MENA military and police forces. This study concurs with previous literature: oil and militaries dominate the conversation. If countries, including the US, want to change the MENA region, they should undoubtedly focus their attention there.

Conclusion

It would seem that the US is putting its money where its mouth is, but is it having its cake and eating it too? Giving aid to MENA governments, and especially to their militaries, superficially and directly seems to support authoritarianism. This creates good relationships with the authoritarian governments who appreciate this US support; however, the effects of US aid (especially military aid) point to a more long-term and subversive democratization strategy by part of the US Government. Future studies should look into other quantitative aspects of US foreign policy, such as purchases of oil from MENA countries, and their effects on MENA authoritarianism. Also, future studies and more time-series data should be used to study individual countries that have had recent democratization movements (like Tunisia and Egypt) to see what levels of US aid could have supported these democratizations. Surprisingly, there is no doublethink; US democratization rhetoric and foreign aid are fact congruent with each other. Slightly and subversively, US aid is prevailing, and Americans can all rest assured that their tax dollars are not just oppressing those in MENA.

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Appendices

Data Sources

	Variable	Locator	Definition (If given)
World Bank	Wealth	NY.GDP.PCAP.KD	GDP per capita (constant 2005 US\$)
	Oil	NY.GDP.PETR.RT.ZS	Oil rents (% of GDP)
	Military Expenditures	MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS	Military expenditure (% of GDP)
	Literacy	SE.ADT.LITR.ZS	Literacy rate, adult total (% of people ages 15 and above)
	Education	SL.TLF.SECO.ZS	Labor force with secondary education (% of total)
	Population (Used to create the per capita aid variables)	SP.POP.TOTL	Population, total
USAID	Economic aid	None	Disbursements
	Military aid	None	Disbursements
Freedom House	Civil Liberties	None	
	Political Rights	None	
Association of Religion Data Archives	Islam	isgenpct	Islam: total percent adherents
CIA World Factbook	Literacy rate (Israel)		Literacy rate, adult total (% of people ages 15 and above)