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‘TRUMP-ED’ DEMOCRATIC IDEALS IN ARAB–US RELATIONS: ‘DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN REVERSE’?

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Abstract

The rise of transactionalism in the Gulf states' relations with the US is set not only to sideline democratic principles, norms, and institutions within Gulf polities, but also within the wider Arab region. Transactionalism in this context favours close American ties with despotic regimes in the Gulf monarchies. The notion of 'democracy promotion in reverse' is introduced in the elaboration of US–Gulf relations in the Trump 2.0 Era. The foreign policies of these authoritarian regimes seem, with the benefit of hindsight and in the context of Arab Spring reforms, to counteract any notion of transformational politics favouring democratization in the rest of the Arab region (Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, Syria, Yemen, etc.).

Introduction

Students of ‘transitology’ have been recording the crisis of democratization, in diverse contexts, by reference to a new apparatus of concepts. ‘De-democratization’, ‘democratic backsliding’, ‘democratic resilience’, ‘degeneration’, and ‘autocratization’ are among those terms that seem nowadays to be enjoying wide currency (Smeltzer & Buyon 2022; Haggard & Kaufman 2021; Krizsán & Roggeband; Sadiki & Saleh 2023; Stanley 2019). This article provides a tentative foundation for a discussion of how these terms fare in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), with special reference to the Arab region. In so doing, it shall not dwell on explaining the differences or nuances in the usage of these concepts, already rehearsed in existing scholarship on democratic decline, including in the Global North.

Instead, one key aim here is to address such decline, not only situationally, but also via stress on the brand of ‘transactional’—versus ‘transformational’—politics the MENA region seems to be witnessing in the ‘Trump 2.0 Era’, Donald Trump’s second tenure as the president of the United States. The Trump Administration’s relation with the Arab region is already reshuffling the cards of the US–Arab power relations, and with it the democracy landscape. Specifically, a landscape in which democratization is noted by its absence, rather than presence. This thematic trajectory critically seeks to bring into focus a form of an ‘unholy alliance’ between Arab Gulf states’ financial prowess and America’s sway and dominance over Arab autocrats. This trend reshapes the alliance in what may be termed ‘democracy promotion in reverse’. It is taking place in a region where good government either has never been embedded (Merkel 2004) in political management (e.g. KSA, UAE and Qatar) or is in other instances witnessing democratic erosion, to varying degrees (Arab Spring polities such as Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Yemen, etc.). Resulting forms of derogation (Haggard & Kaufman 2021) exist in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia as a result of emergency laws, to the dismay of human rights activists threatened by continuous curtailment of the margins of existence for civil and political societies. The autocratic footprints of this precipitous non-democratic reshaping of Arab politics spells the death knell for democratization in this region, at least in the foreseeable future.

Opening caveats and assumptions

The analysis sought here does not establish a direct link, per se, between Arab de-democratization and Trump's policy towards the MENA region. That would require empirical evidence that cannot be obtained within the short span of US–Arab relations in the five-month-old Trump 2.0 Era. However, the article argues that de-democratization, already begun before Trump's second administration, will be further exacerbated by the brand of transactionalism marking a quasi-strategic convergence between oil-rich autocrats and a populist president.

Table 1. *2 Trillion Dollar Gulf Investment Signed in Trump's May 2025 Tour of the Arab Gulf*

Country	**Amount and Description**
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	$600 billion ($142 billion for US arms)
Qatar	$1.2 trillion deal, including: • $243 billion (including $96 billion in Boeing aircrafts & AI investments) • Plus a $400 million plane donated to the US government
United Arab Emirates	$200 billion (stage 1 in a $1.4 trillion investment over 10 years)

Source: USA Today, 16 May 2025

In a nutshell, these mutually interest-driven trade-offs between Arab rulers and the US administration may solidify the Arab Gulf as a geostrategic (existence of US bases) and geo-economic (to limit China's influence and market access) battleground, but not a space for the promotion of good government. Never before has a cluster of Arab states represented so stark an example of the trade-offs between imperial power protection and 'privileged treatment', along with dependence by the richer Gulf Security Council states (KSA, Qatar, UAE). In the context of neoliberal globalization, the expansion of US military, political, economic, strategic, and diplomatic influence seems to translate into indifference to autocratic exercise of power in national politics and adventurism in foreign policy.

Democracy and democratization are not currently referred to with the kind of reverence they received prior to the Arab Spring 'counter-revolutions' and the genocide in Gaza (Sadiki & Saleh 2025). In the MENA region, today, all manner of 'isms' (nationalism, Pan-Arabism, Islamism) arguably appear less convincing than they did a few decades ago. Nonetheless, analysis that self-consciously seeks to deploy democratization or de-democratization as the vehicle of theoretical examination suffers from some limitations. To begin with, there is a relational dimension. This dimension is integral to any understanding of the condition/state of Arab democratization of lack thereof. A plethora of relations can be summoned to capture this point. There are those relations pitting the former 'colonizers' (today owners and standard bearers of democracy/democratization) and the former colonized (still mired in dependency). Domestically, state-society and ruler-ruled relations continue to be beset by conflict, and relations between local and global values/cultures/systems of knowledge production do not necessarily privilege those who struggle for democracy, those who may in fact be most in need of the much-vaunted justice to be had from political and socio-economic equality. From a relational angle, the absence of democracy in such regimes, or its erosion where it was introduced sparingly (e.g. Tunisia 2011–2021) is, partly, shaped by the Global North's tendency to prop up client or pliant rulers in the Global South. One irony is not to be missed or dismissed. The current degradation of viable democratic alternatives in the MENA region is not unrelated to relations with major power players and centres of cultural/democratic production in the world.

Moreover, and relatedly, when backsliding afflicts the US (Mickey, Levitsky & Way 2017) a key ally and sponsor of MENA non-democracies, the question is no longer just whether America is 'safe for democracy'. It is also a question of whether the Arab region can be safe for democracy, and whether the friends of Trump's America think democracy, in the first place. 'Backsliding' in the US as the oldest democracy (even if it satisfies Merkel's [2004, 33–58] five tests of 'embedded democracy'), spells doom for the hope of democratic change for those struggling for it in the Global South, including MENA. Maybe there is no perfect 'city on the hill'-type polity. The Trump 1.0 'presidency has punctured many Americans' beliefs about their country's exceptionalism' (Mickey, Levitsky & Way 2017, 29). However, Americans can replace their governments in spite of forms of democratic erosion. For the MENA region's democratically-minded publics, the Trump 2.0 Era, with its rapprochement with non-democratic Gulf rulers, may not hold out hope for furthering the cause of democratization in Arab countries.

One caveat of note is that students of Arab democratization or de-democratization face the challenge of a lack of a readily available corpus of empirical data that allow for thorough study, comparatively and on the basis of a longue durée, to parse issues of democratization crises. An 'electoralist' focus may not yield the nuance and sophistication one finds in studies of Eastern European and Southern and Latin American experiences of democratization. One is left with limited choices of method and methodology (Sadiki 2009). With their dearth of data on Arab states, the rich datasets (e.g. V-Dem) students of democracy draw on when writing patterns of democratic deterioration around the world, actually limit systematic analysis, much less deep learning of Arab democratic experiences.

One sobering reminder to keep in mind is that democracy is not single and fixed. In its continuous mutations throughout history, democracy 'dwells in a house of contingency'

Flowing from the above, these data limitations have not diminished Arab interest in democratization (Sadiki 2009) as a 'global good' or the critical scrutiny of the 'travel' of democracy (Keane 2022), including in the Arab region. That travel cautions against Orientalist stereotypes that often relegate Arabs to a 'box', an 'exile', in which excessive knowledge gatekeeping may only counter-act democracy's inclusiveness (Sadiki 2004). It is facile to exaggerate the ontological opposition of 'West' and 'East'. The antidote to this is not to dismiss enduring colonial encounters, but rather to account for specificity of postcolonial histories, 'modernities', polities, societies, and cultures whose own repertoires of knowledge-making do not necessarily hinder assimilation of democratic good practices. One sobering reminder to keep in mind is that democracy is not single and fixed. In its continuous mutations throughout history, democracy 'dwells in a house of contingency' (Keane 2009, 160–61). The fluidity and instability of democracy and democratization pertain to all political systems, those that are established, consolidated, electoral or even fledgeling democracies. Maybe that is one of the very few 'universal' realities that hold true in relation to cases studies of Arab democratization's chequered histories. Such histories record instances of twofold backsliding, as elaborated by Haggard and Kaufman (whose case studies do not include the MENA region): a) 'incremental erosion of democratic institutions'; and b) 'anti-democratic actions by duly elected governments', often under the watchful eye of an 'autocratic leader' (Haggard & Kaufman 2021, 1). This summarizes the July 2021 self-coup by Tunisia's elected president, Kais Saied (Sadiki 2025). Assaults on democratization take many forms, all of which prevent good government issuing from the people or to enable citizens to replace delegitimized rulers. Since the 2011 Arab uprisings, protests and revolutions have been the means by which people removed their rulers. The latest (through an armed militia) in Syria, in December 2024, was an unexpected finale to an initially peaceful revolution begun in 2011 and then quashed by force by the ousted Asad's army before devolving into a long, multi-sided war. Przeworski's democratic test is of relevance here. A democracy is one in which the people exercise one important right: removal of incumbent governments (2019, 5). Today, the reverses in Egypt (2013) and in Tunisia (2021), where forms of elections and rights exist, perhaps point to diminished democratization. This is a spectrum with varying degrees of defective properties, as per Merkel's sub-types of defective democracy (2004) such as 'tutelage', exclusionary practices, and illiberal tendencies.

Trump 2.0 Era: Democracy promotion ‘in reverse’

Democracy promotion is often treated in the Arab context with suspicion by populists and some voices amongst public opinion formulators. Enduring effects of a colonial residue, of sorts, continue to inform such publics long after independence. They do not manifest only in political structures (the nation-state), or economic systems (dependent capitalism such as via ‘oil colonies’, and business classes being plugged into globalization along with an economic logic of accumulation). Where democracy promotion is involved, the name of the game for rulers and client publics (e.g. in the Middle East) seems to be political tutelage, diminished sovereignty, conditionality and in worst case scenarios, regime change’ (Carothers 2006). Thus, a ‘dictator’s learning curve’ (Dobson 2012) is visible in how Arab rulers engage democracy promotion. They adapt to it mostly via façade democratization to tick the box of conditions set by foreign donors. A modicum of compliance with norms of good government is key to political performance that appears to be responsive to global democratic ‘metrics’ and, above all else, and to ensuring continued foreign aid and investments. This is not specific to the Middle East.

Democracy promotion is not a torch to be passed on from the ‘West’ to the rest. Even if democracy has been embedded into the histories and identities of democracy promoters, they have tended to miss one link in the chain of democratization. That link is that democracy is not uniform or static. It is subject to continuous evolution and to social construction. Its navigation of Arab postcolonial contexts demands constant negotiation across divides of history, culture, language, and religion. Some of democracy’s standards, such as individualism and secularism, are culturally contingent. They cannot be promoted as universal truths. EU–MENA association agreements were concluded in the 1990s with authoritarian regimes, two of which (e.g. Egypt and Tunisia) were ousted in the 2011 Arab uprisings. The result of these ‘partnerships’ was adoption of ‘elections without democracy’ (Sadiki 2009). The roles assigned to dictators like Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak and Tunisia’s Zinealbidine Ben Ali were to sustain stability and partake in the global war against terrorism. EU democracy promotion is mired in contradictions as EU member states pursue different foreign policy agendas. Thus Pace (2009) notes how the normative impact of democracy promotion in Arab states is minimal. Security is often prioritized over democracy. This is evident in the EU and US continuous support of Egypt, even after the 2013 coup and a tarnished record of human rights practices (Achrainer & Pace 2023). The EU’s collaboration in the southern Mediterranean rim, with democratically backsliding governments to police illegal migration, has ended all pretence for the ideals of democracy promotion. Tunisia is a case in point (Sajous & Moreno 2024). Stability, not democracy, is the name of the game, so to speak (Dana 2023). The question posed by Burnell (2007), of whether democracy promotion works, has strong resonance when reviewing its poor track record in the Arab region.

The record of democracy promotion in terms of effectiveness (Burnell 2007) as a tool for diffusing democratic norms globally is complicated by blatantly interventionist strategies. A particularly pernicious example is the US invasion of Iraq. Its declared goal was to install a democratic government after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. Bush’s ‘Freedom Agenda’ in MENA has resulted, so far, in less democracy and more instability (Burnett 2007). As a foreign policy norm, democracy promotion has tended to cause ‘discomfort’ (Carothers 2006). The phrase ‘backlash against democracy promotion’ (Carothers 2006) is invoked to note that, like in other regions, democracy promotion in the Arab region today is contested in a disapproving way, maybe even a derogatory fashion. It is a case of a policy that began as a normatively acceptable strategy to become associated with no more than the veneer of good governance.

This unease is real in the Arab region. The Trump 2.0 Era strategy has tended, thus far, to unburden countries in the region of the unease of democracy promotion. There is a divide in its deployment: it is never extended to the oil-rich monarchies of the Arab Gulf, the US’s most significant regional allies, after Israel. This double-standard gives latitude to both Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) rulers and their Western partners in foreign policy, politics, and economics. Democracy promotion is institutionalized as a legitimate tool of both EU and US foreign policy in those Arab states dependent on foreign aid and investments. This is a key distinction, which will be elaborated upon as the discussion of ‘democracy promotion in reverse’ unfolds in the discussion below. Arguing the case of ‘democracy promotion in reverse’ in the Arab region is warranted by two factors.

First is the Trump administration's indifference to issues of democratization in the Gulf region and elsewhere. Note his cuts to assistance to democracy promotion in Asia too (Kurlantzick 2025). Secondly, the rising influence of the oil-rich states of the Gulf during the Trump 2.0 Era adds plausibility to how authoritarian practices, and not democracy, may flourish as a result of closer alliance with the US. The upshot is that the nature of the bilateral relations the Trump 2.0 presidency seems to be headed towards is cultivation of 'transactional', versus 'transformational' foreign policies (Bashirov & Yilmaz 2019). Transactional approximates quid pro quo-type relations, confined to material, monetary, and strategic exchanges (bankrolling continuous stationing of US bases), excluding sensitive issues such as human rights and democracy, especially in the Gulf states. There is almost a 'personalist' character: the US, an established democracy, concludes 'deals' (Iyengar 2025), which may be vetted by democratic institutions within the U.S. (although that appears to be declining). Identical processes of checks and balances do not exist in Gulf states whose rulers have more leeway in the negotiation and approval of deals with foreign parties.

TRUMPED DEMOCRATIC NORMS IN THE GULF STATES AND THE REGION

Some of the above features align with the description of trasactionalism offered by Bashirov and Yilmaz (2019) who associate it with personalist leaders such as Turkey's Recep Tayeb Erdogan, and more specifically, President Donald Trump. 'Deal-making' (Trump & Schwartz 2015) is suited to 'transactionalist' foreign policy in the Trump 2.0 presidency and is a key practice shaping US power relations with the Gulf states. Central to this transactionalist strategy is stress on 'bilateral relations while degrading multilateralism' (Bashirov & Yilmaz 2019, 2–3). 'Bilateral deals…are easier to complete and can provide short-term benefits' (ibid., 2–3). More importantly, this strategy 'rejects value-based policymaking which it considers to be harmful to national interests. Transactional relationships are not grounded in common values, and shared historical bonds are a secondary consideration' (ibid., 2–3). Transactionalism's 'obsession with winning now' yields contradictory policies. Thus, individual states and the Middle East region, as a whole, could forfeit democratic transformation. In a context in which the US and its allies are fearful of losing allies to China and Russia, policymakers seem to have little bandwidth for thinking and acting strategically. Instead, democracy promoters who once had the resolve to turn the allure of democracy into practicable and relentless policies and policy priorities, nowadays lean toward short-term interests over longer-term return. That is, opting for transactional over transformative goals, and pursuing reactive rather than proactive politics in which democratic governance matters. For transformation to occur 'the introduction of democratic order…or an institutional framework among the core countries that constitute a region' (Paul 2012, 6) is imperative. No transformation of political institutions is expected to unfold within the Gulf states.

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It is no exaggeration to state that the only power modification happening in the richer Gulf region is that of a younger leadership working to further entrench the state into 'personal fiefdoms', with varying mechanisms used to reproduce rentier welfare processes. Such processes serve to reinstitute traditional ruling models granting royal houses vast influence over a quietist citizenry (barring Bahrain and Kuwait). A proportion of proceedings from gas/oil rents is allocated to pay for subsidized goods and social programs, tax-free salaries and high living standards. The system of generous subsidies has cultivated a 'deferential' political culture, with citizens performing rituals of allegiance to the powers that be. The qualified exception is Kuwait, which has had periodic elections for a National Assembly (NA), a rare forum of an imperfect but functional 'parliamentary democracy', since the 1960s. Emir Sheikh Meshal al-Ahmad Al Sabah's suspension of the NA in May 2024 (ADHRB 2024) marked a form of de-democratization in the only GCC state that has had longstanding experience of electoral practices and constitutional provisions. After the pro-democracy movement began in Bahrain in 2011, as part of the Arab Spring uprisings, the tiny monarchy, aided by neighbouring GCC states, deployed force as part of a widespread crackdown on all dissidence, including Sunni, Shi'ite, and secularist (Middle East Eye 2021).

By sketching a picture of the richer Gulf states (e.g. KSA, Qatar, and UAE), the discussion turns to showcase how, by becoming a hub of regional leadership, these GCC states displace traditional powerful actors (e.g. Egypt, Algeria, Iraq, Syria, Morocco, Libya). A critique of along the lines of democracy promotion in reverse ensues. A key specificity of these states is their brand of vibrant modernization (smart cities, higher literacy rates, increasing female visibility, media cities, and large numbers of students trained in Western universities) that is devoid of any democratic reckoning. Modernization theory's assumed linear progression from tradition to modernity faces challenges in the Gulf. Existing evidence points to a nuanced reality: modern cities, Westernized elites and rich citizenry have worked to sustain traditional modes of authority, not overthrow them. Foreign relations are an important factor. The Gulf states have petrodollar largesse. This shields them from external pressure, conditionality, and all forms of activities by foreign powers intended to change regimesor promote democracy. Trump's speech to West Point cadets on May 25, 2025 breaks with former administrations' commitment to democracy promotion. He expressed opposition to using hard power to 'transform foreign cultures' and engage in 'nation-building crusades' (Kim & Swenson 2025). Three interrelated observations are in order. Firstly, defenders of decolonizing knowledge and values should treat any democracy 'de-promotion' with their own serious visions of political renewal. Secondly, democracy de-promotion does not signal an end of influencing international relations via other means, including stealth ones, as well as other power structures and Euro-American models of technological, economic, and cultural production. And third, the case of the Gulf states epitomizes this state of affairs, where hydrocarbon industries and security apparatuses are tied to Western partners not inclined to prioritize democracy over economic and security interests.

The US transactionalist strategy in its dealings with the richer oil states can be said to demote, not promote democracy not only in the GCC countries, but also in the rest of the Arab region.

The ideas outlined below summarize the main points of 'democracy promotion in reverse' in the context of the Gulf states, highlighting brief evidence for this line of argument.

The US transactionalist strategy in its dealings with the richer oil states can be said to demote, not promote, democracy not only in the GCC countries, but also in the rest of the Arab region. Oil wealth has freed countries like KSA, UAE, and Qatar from dependence on US and EU monies and investments. Democracy is the missing link in the chain of EU–Gulf states relations (Teruggi 2021). Aid has been one of the key tools used by democracy promoters to pressure states into integrating varying degrees of reforms into their political systems. On the money front, the GCC states actually come out on top. They have a quasi-comparative advantage that is not available to the populous and poor Arab states, often subject to external pressure to reform institutions and human rights. One report describes GCC donors as 'quiet giants' (Salisbury 2018). The author documents evidence showing that Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia 'have also become increasingly prominent donors to the World Bank and UN humanitarian and …they have been the source of large amounts of overseas development assistance (ODA), humanitarian aid, and other forms of support for developing and crisis afflicted countries, both through state-led channels and through the work of private organizations and individual donors' (Salisbury 2018, 5–6). This international leverage, since decolonization, has been the exclusive bastion of the world's rich and industrialized countries, such as the US, UK, France, Japan, Australia, and Canada. Furthermore, the GCC states have another strength that acts as a double-edged sword: large expatriate labour forces, which help developing countries though badly-needed remittances (World Bank 2023). As Malpass (2022) argues, remittances are vital economic stabilizers in the global economy. Egypt is such a country he mentions in his report. It has millions of expatriate workers in the GCC countries. The flip side of this argument is that need for remittances by the poor and populous Arab states can act as a 'destabilizer', a pressure point for GCC countries, which have in the past used expatriate labour to influence Arab states' policies. The use of repatriation, or the threat of it, is known to have been used in the past, a factor of which Arab dictators are mindful. Remittances are not expendable: they benefit weak and dependent economies and to an extent, this Gulf aid protects Arab authoritarian rulers from Euro-American intervention on issues of democratization and human rights. In a nutshell, the GCC helps development in many parts of the world. However, this regional security and economic alliance is not itself a bastion of democratic development in the region or in the management of its domestic politics (Sadiki 2020).

Moreover, democracy promotion in reverse may be aided by neoliberal economic transactionalism. Today, Saudi Arabia's Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) and the UAE's Mohammed Bin Zayed (MBZ) are elevated to world agents of rapprochement with the West, especially the US. The neglect of human rights, particularly in relation to violations in the Yemen war, the Sudan war, and the UAE's occupation of the Yemeni island, is a glaring omission in the investment deals concluded with these countries. The narrative on MBS has shifted from denunciation after the murder of the Saudi dissident, Jamal Khashoggi, to lavish praise (by Trump in the 2025 tour) as a leader of a thriving country. Only four years ago, the Biden Administration was displeased with MBS's approval of the murder of Khashoggi with 'counter-dissident' activities by the Saudi state (Kirchgaessner 2021). MBZ is no less guilty of human rights violations, including in the Sudan. This is no secret, and numerous reports and accounts present evidence of such transgressions in Yemen, too, another conflict-ridden state. One journalist from the region has this to say about the UAE:

> Sudan is key to the UAE's strategy in Africa and the Middle East, aimed at achieving political and economic hegemony while curbing democratic aspirations. Since 2015, it has sourced fighters from both factions to join its conflict in Yemen. It is the primary importer of Sudan's gold and has multibillion-dollar plans to develop ports along Sudan's Red Sea coast. By supporting the RSF in Sudan, it has undermined the democratic transition that followed the 2019 ouster of Omar al-Bashir, Sudan's dictator for 30 years. (Mahjoub 2024)

The Yemen mis-adventure began with a Saudi-led coalition that included the KSA, Qatar and UAE. The latter two withdrew as the war caused well-publicized atrocities and failed to defeat the Houthis. But the quest for seeing justice done for crimes committed there, involving KSA and the UAE, goes on, including by organizations such as The European Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (ECDHR n.d. See the report "War crimes in Yemen: a long-overdue call for accountability").

There is always the fear that protests prove infectious and there are misgivings about democratic procedures in a region where the demographics may not favour the ruling houses.

Qatar has been a hub for cultural production and has rebranded itself successfully via the global role played by its media network Aljazeera. The channel was a powerful medium that helped Arab dissidents in the lead-up to the Arab uprisings. Yet, Qatar participated in the joint Gulf states' Saudi-led force used to suppress the 2011 Bahrain protests (BBC 2011). Thus, Qatar was not ostensibly neutral towards the Arab uprisings. It supported them outside the Gulf region and acted against them in Bahrain. The GCC, with the qualified exception of Kuwait, is a quintessential example of a region that assumed a counter-revolutionary stance in 2011 and beyond. There is always the fear that protests prove infectious and there are misgivings about democratic procedures in a region where the demographics may not favour the ruling houses. Qatar illustrates this point. Qatar's recent October 2024 referendum on constitutional amendments received 90.6 percent approval against elections for the Shura Council (Constitution Net 2024). After the 2021 experiment with legislative elections of two-thirds of this institution, Qatar will revert back to Emiri appointments of the 45-seat advisory Shura Council. The controversy arose because only Qataris who could prove nationality in 1930 had voting rights. As a result, a majority of Almurra tribes were excluded from the 2021 electoral process. They were at the forefront of 'protest at the law that bars Qataris whose family was not present in Qatar before 1930 from voting' (Reuters 2021). Even with its members fully appointed, the Council shall remain toothless as the major decisions remain as the prerogative of the Emir and his aides. These include security matters, foreign investments, and policies on defence agreements with external partners. Plus, Qatar's civil society is state-controlled and funded, active mostly in development, charity, family matters, and health.

Conclusion

The MENA region, namely its Arab states, seem to be experiencing a ‘wave’ of growing authoritarianism. The line of argument followed in this article points to an authoritarian ‘re-turn’. The GCC states, in particular, have the petrodollar largesse, and global influence, as both the US and the EU are drifting to indifference to democracy and democracy promotion, to co-opt democratic lobbies in the world. The oil-rich GCC states, especially KSA, Qatar and the UAE, have gained political kudos internationally and use their rich coffers to shield themselves from interventions on behalf of democracy. Thus, they have become adept at circumventing norms of democratization. More importantly, they are generous donors of financial aid and providers of employment to Arab states, giving them room to resist pressure by Western powers to democratize. Thus, *Foreign Policy*’s Michael Hirsh opines that ‘new authoritarianism’ is enveloping the Middle East (15 May 2025). One tell-tale symptom is Trump’s approval of Syria’s former Jihadist, Ahmed Alsharaa, an agenda driven by Saudi Arabia’s MBS. The demotion of democratization is one result of the transactionalist strategies deployed in US–Arab foreign policies.

Advocates of decolonizing democracy and democratization endlessly champion the US taking a back seat on issues related to democracy promotion, values-based partnerships, support for social justice and the defence of human rights. The resulting faults of Trump 2.0 orders may show up in the future as both the US and the EU increasingly give in to Gulf and other regional despots and continue to abdicate leadership on the spread of democracy. Trump got his Qatari plane and trillions of dollars from his newly championed Arab Gulf partners. However, Arab civil societies must not have their wills hijacked by transactionalist foreign policy strategies. They must remain vociferous defenders of good government and that does not have to mimic Western systems.

Democracy promotion will not in the foreseeable future tempt the millions of Arabs who most need it. Transactionalism in US–Arab relations masks substantive contradictions. Even more dangerously, the discussion above shows that ‘democracy promotion in reverse’ becomes possible as the GCC’s richer states assume roles that may not help overall promotion of democratic governance, either in their own internal societies, or regionally. Through close association with America’s Trump, they could become ready tools for advancing the cause of (shared) economic and strategic interests (e.g. expensive armament), in which democracy does not feature at all. Even at the rhetorical level, defending democracy does not feature in the political rhetoric of the Trump 2.0 administration. Funding geared towards democracy promotion faces severe cuts (Roth 2025). Unlike the US-led war in Iraq in 2003, the recent B-2 strikes on June 22 against three of Iran’s nuclear sites (Sonnenfeld, Ross, Hakakian & Tian 2025) were not aligned with a defence of democratic values. Rather, they were solely driven by strategic / security considerations. Arguably, the prospects of both peace and democracy have just become more complex and uncertain.

Yet, the forces, discourses, and activists who most loudly stick their necks out for sustainable democratization in the rest of the poorer Arab world are not prepared to give up the fight on behalf of human rights, equality, and democracy. Democracy may be another ‘bread’ for the oppressed and have-nots of the Arab Middle East.

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