



## Realism and Democracy: American Foreign Policy after the Arab Spring, by Elliott Abrams

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To cite this article: Benjamin Acosta (2017) Realism and Democracy: American Foreign Policy after the Arab Spring, by Elliott Abrams, *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, 8:4, 407-411, DOI: [10.1080/21520844.2018.1435120](https://doi.org/10.1080/21520844.2018.1435120)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21520844.2018.1435120>



Published online: 08 Mar 2018.



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BOOK REVIEW

***Realism and Democracy: American Foreign Policy after the Arab Spring***, by Elliott Abrams. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 310 pp., \$24.99 hardcover.

During eight years of a feckless and disastrous United States (U.S.) foreign policy under the Obama administration, America sat by and watched Iranian security forces gun down Green Revolution activists in Tehran's streets, Syria turn into the new century's greatest human rights crisis, and ad-Dawleh al-Islamiyyeh (the Islamic State) murder, rape, and slave trade its way into the annals of genocidal maniacs. In *Realism and Democracy: American Foreign Policy after the Arab Spring*, Elliott Abrams takes the reader on a tour of the ideological ups and downs of contemporary U.S. foreign policy. Abrams uncovers the effects that various foreign policy approaches can have on the Arab and Islamic worlds in the foreseeable future and offers some optimism for repairing the cause of democracy promotion.

As a former official and key advocate of democracy promotion in the Reagan and George W. Bush administrations, Abrams remains well-suited for helping devise a strategy to advance the cause of freedom across the globe. Indeed, he stands at the center of a decades-long effort to shape U.S. foreign policy along neoconservative principles and resist the morally bankrupt ideologies of realism and isolationism, as well as the relativistic and suicidal tendencies of liberal internationalism. Like some other neoconservatives, Abrams attempts to swipe the moniker of realism.<sup>1</sup> In reality (pun intended), with *Realism and Democracy*, Abrams continues a stalwart promotion of neoconservatism.

Neoconservatism falls under the category of an expansionist ideology, as its core component consists of *spreading* democracy and liberty.<sup>2</sup> Neoconservatism works from the constructivist premise that the “character of political regimes determines the political character of their citizens.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, if one alters the environment, those living within it will subsequently change their behavior. Accordingly, in the post-9/11 context, neoconservatives within the George W. Bush administration (including Abrams) sought to curb the appeal of fundamentalist Islam by extending freedom to the highly oppressed peoples of the Arab and Islamic worlds. As democracies tend not to go to war against fellow democracies, the moral cause of spreading democracy synthesizes with the strategic endeavor of expanding peace.

Perspectives on foreign policy in general and on foreign intervention in particular fall along two spectrums (one ideological and one strategic) and classify within one of four broad categories. In [Figure 1](#), I place the respective framings of expansionism, liberal internationalism, realism, and isolationism. Isolationists (i.e., the Ron and Rand Pauls of the world) see no value in engaging internationally under most any circumstance—moral or strategic. Realists (or, in Abrams' terms, the “erroneously pragmatic”<sup>4</sup>) willingly engage

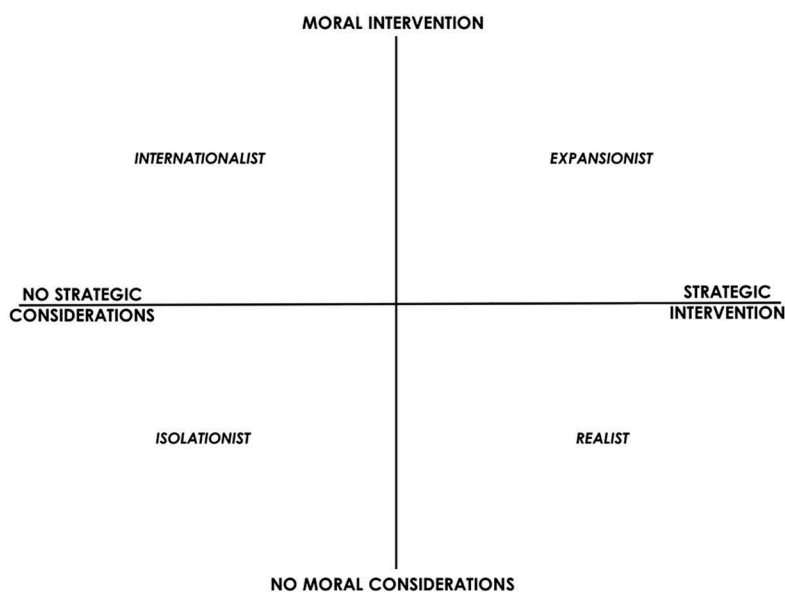
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<sup>1</sup>See Charles Krauthammer, “Democratic Realism: An American Foreign Policy for a Unipolar World,” Irving Kristol Lecture American Enterprise Institute (AEI) Annual Dinner (February 10, 2004). [www.aei.org/publication/democratic-realism](http://www.aei.org/publication/democratic-realism).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Aaron Rapport, “Unexpected Affinities? Neoconservatism's Place in IR Theory,” *Security Studies* 17, no. 2 (2008): 269.

<sup>4</sup>Elliott Abrams, *Realism and Democracy: American Foreign Policy after the Arab Spring* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 90.



**Figure 1.** Foreign intervention perspectives.

only when doing so affects the national interest materially. Liberal internationalists like to promote moralistic human rights without imposition or coercion and, as Abrams notes, they seek to “restrain American power”<sup>5</sup> in pursuit of a post-American era of world politics. Expansionists stand in the quadrant where promoting internal ideology reflects an external strategic *and* moral imperative. Ideologies like neoconservatism (as well as Leninism and Islamism) interpret the strategic world in the ideological terms of “exceptionalism.”<sup>6</sup> For example, neoconservatives see value in promoting democracy, as the perspective frames strategic interaction in terms of expanding the “democratic peace.”

In *Realism and Democracy*, Abrams makes the case that autocracy in the Islamic world marks the greatest challenge to contemporary international security, and democracy represents the fix. Yet his prescriptions for expanding the democratic world tend to miss the mark. Mimicking Lenin, Abrams concludes with a prescriptive chapter titled “What is to Be Done?”<sup>7</sup> For Arab states, Abrams chiefly argues for the U.S. to encourage gradual strengthening of political contestation in existing autocracies.<sup>8</sup> This entails presidential leadership on the matter, requires a halt to allowing autocrats to stymie political development, focuses on protecting minorities, emphasizes a shift in foreign aid programs from civil society projects to constructing liberal political parties, and a reevaluation of aid in general.<sup>9</sup>

Problematically, Abrams misidentifies the origins of much of today’s political violence. Authoritarian regimes do not create violent actors. Autocrats may breed the aim of revolution, yet revolutionaries come in the nonviolent form just as frequently as they come in the violent version.<sup>10</sup> Only ideologies that promote violent means to achieve

<sup>5</sup>Abrams, *Realism and Democracy*, 90.

<sup>6</sup>Rapport, 259.

<sup>7</sup>See Vladimir I. Lenin, *What is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement* (New York, NY: International Publishers, [1902] 1969).

<sup>8</sup>Abrams, *Realism and Democracy*, 215.

<sup>9</sup>Abrams, *Realism and Democracy*, 217–37.

<sup>10</sup>Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011).

their ends—not autocratic institutions—lead individuals and organizations with revolutionary aims to adopt violent tactics. One instigates the outcome goal, whereas the other sets “appropriate” means for achieving the end. In this regard, Abrams underestimates the appeal of fundamentalist Islam and consequently absolves the ideology of causing the high degree of political violence that consistently emanates from the Islamic world.<sup>11</sup> Abrams claims that in “most Arab countries” one can identify Islamists with only a “substantial minority.”<sup>12</sup> This is pure fantasy. Increasingly, a strong current of Islamism runs through the Arab and Islamic worlds.<sup>13</sup>

Ultimately, Islamist organizations, more so than autocratic institutions, stymie democracy in the Arab and Islamic worlds. Most autocratic systems involve some degree of popular representation.<sup>14</sup> Conversely, the ideology of Islamism—under any formation—remains incompatible with democracy, considering that it emphasizes a reliance on *shari’a* (Islamic law), which privileges Muslims over non-Muslims with supremacist rigor and offers few meaningful protections of women and zero for homosexuals. Abrams rightly<sup>15</sup> acknowledges that “[political] exclusion [of Islamist parties] will not persuade citizens that their ideas are wrong and dangerous.”<sup>16</sup> Yet he missteps in concluding that “Only open debate... can do that.”<sup>17</sup>

A simple diversity of ideas will not spawn durable democracies.<sup>18</sup> Today, across much of the Arab and Islamic worlds, bombs speak louder than words; in the absence of autocrats, militant organizations tend to monopolize political discourse, rendering the notion of “open debate” farcical. Even in Lebanon—the Arab world’s sole democracy nearing consolidation<sup>19</sup>—leading parties across the political spectrum maintain the capacity for doubling as militant organizations. Only under the protection of external coercive forces can identity groups generate a democratic political culture that enables open debate. Modern history shows that a democratic political culture that bolsters, stabilizes, and eventually consolidates democratic institutions emerges either organically from Western thought (e.g., the United Kingdom [U.K.] and U.S.) or forcefully via sustained military occupation and the foreign imposition of cultural change (e.g., Germany, India, Japan, and South Korea). The cultures of specific identity groups necessarily democratize before their associated political institutions can.<sup>20</sup> More than any other factors, geographic proximity to, or the duration of colonization or military occupation by, the U.K. or U.S. predict the likelihood of a state to democratize.

<sup>11</sup>For scholarly explanations of Islamism’s predisposition to employing violent means, see Assaf Moghadam, “Motives for Martyrdom: Al Qaida, Salafi Jihad, and the Spread of Suicide Attacks,” *International Security* 33, no. 3 (2009): 46–78; and Benjamin Acosta, “Dying for Survival: Why Militant Organizations Continue to Conduct Suicide Attacks,” *Journal of Peace Research* 53, no. 2 (2016): 180–96.

<sup>12</sup>Abrams, *Realism and Democracy*, 147.

<sup>13</sup>David Cook and Olivia Allison, *Understanding and Addressing Suicide Attacks: The Faith and Politics of Martyrdom Operations* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007).

<sup>14</sup>See Jennifer Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>15</sup>Empirical political science confirms that political exclusion drives most intra-state armed conflict. See Lars-Erik Cederman, Andreas Wimmer, and Brian Min, “Why Do Ethnic Groups Rebel? New Data and Analysis,” *World Politics* 62, no. 1 (2010): 87–119; and Julian Wucherpfennig, Nils W. Metternich, Lars-Erik Cederman, and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, “Ethnicity, the State, and the Duration of Civil War,” *World Politics* 64, no. 1 (2012): 79–115.

<sup>16</sup>Abrams, *Realism and Democracy*, 153.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>Further, empirical political science shows that setting up democratic institutions does not amount to successful democratization. See Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>19</sup>Micheline Germanos Ghaas, “The Consolidation of the Consociational Democracy in Lebanon” (PhD dissertation, Portland State University, 2013).

<sup>20</sup>Seymour Martin Lipset, “Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy,” *American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (1959): 69–105; Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1963); and Inglehart and Welzel.

Abrams suggests intra-organizational democracy as the solution to the “necessity” of permitting Islamist parties to participate in nascent electoral systems, implying that a party’s internal democratization can somehow lead to its ideological liberalization.<sup>21</sup> Yet are organizations generally capable of ideological change? My empirical work demonstrates that militant organizations rarely abandon their outcome goals, even when “transitioning” to formal political parties.<sup>22</sup> Organizations like Lebanon’s Hezbollah and Palestinian Hamas still pursue the same ends that they have since their inceptions, yet with a new set of means. As Abrams admits, after the ill-conceived establishment of an electoral system for Palestinian terrorist organizations, they now operate with “both ‘ballots and bullets’ simultaneously.”<sup>23</sup> The *exclusion dilemma* often leads Western diplomats to abandon their better judgement and hoist up organizations like Fatah—the terrorist organization that initiated the bloody *al-Aqsa intifada* (2000–2005)—as some ideal vis-à-vis organizations like Hamas. Abrams laments Hamas’ 2006 electoral victory over Fatah,<sup>24</sup> without acknowledging the shared outcome goal of the two organizations and their constituents: to eradicate the Jewish state.<sup>25</sup> Fatah’s strategic approach of pledging the right things to “gullible” Western officials at opportune moments represents its only real difference from Hamas.<sup>26</sup>

In another respect, efforts to invent nuance between Fatah and Hamas reveal Abrams’s reluctance to embrace the underlying brilliance of the neoconservative approach. Democratic elections in the Islamic world are always a win-win. If democratization results in a peaceful liberal democracy, then great. If, on the other hand, elections result in the ascent to power of a terrorist organization, then the given voting population has unveiled itself as an adversary of peace. In such a situation, never mind the emperor, *the people have no clothes*. Without the cover of an autocrat, the people are ideologically exposed. The only thing Abrams should have taken away from the 2006 U. S.-made Palestinian Authority elections was that not all identity groups deserve a state<sup>27</sup>—especially when the only two organizations that plausibly represent an identity group’s majority are terrorist organizations that do not hide their intolerance of non-Muslims or their genocidal fantasies of destroying the Jewish state. In the future, the U.S. should do all that it can to prevent such identity groups from ever gaining anything that resembles the reigns of state power. This is something that former White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon understood perfectly well when he reportedly refused “to breathe the same air as that terrorist [Fatah-leader Mahmoud Abbas]” and boycotted the meeting between him and President Trump.<sup>28</sup>

In *Realism and Democracy*, Abrams identifies various viewpoints within the American populace and political class that neoconservatives must wage an intellectual insurgency against to revive the agenda of expanding the democratic world and strengthening international security. Neoconservatives will necessarily work as ideological guerrillas operating against much more powerful elitist establishments. Unfortunately, last year,

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<sup>21</sup>Abrams, *Realism and Democracy*, 149.

<sup>22</sup>Benjamin Acosta, “From Bombs to Ballots: When Militant Organizations Transition to Political Parties,” *Journal of Politics* 76, no. 3 (2014): 666–83.

<sup>23</sup>Abrams, *Realism and Democracy*, 150.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 239; see also Elliott Abrams, *Tested by Zion: The Bush Administration and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press), 163.

<sup>25</sup>Ido Zerkovitz, “Fatah’s Embrace of Islamism,” *Middle East Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (2008); and Benny Morris, *One State, Two State: Resolving the Israel/Palestine Conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>26</sup>Morris, 167–68.

<sup>27</sup>The Reagan administration had this issue right in “favor[ing] a Palestinian association with Jordan.” Abrams, *Tested by Zion*, 16.

<sup>28</sup>Tamar Pileggi, “Bannon Boycotted Trump Meet with ‘Terrorist’ Abbas—Report,” *Times of Israel*, August 21, 2017.

like many other neoconservatives, Abrams jumped on the “Never Trump” bandwagon<sup>29</sup> and it cost the movement.<sup>30</sup> In the coming years, advocates of democracy promotion will need to sidestep petty domestic political battles and reach out to the Trump administration. If nothing else, neoconservatives share an anti-establishment timbre with President Trump. Neoconservatives should focus on reaching out to President Trump and convincing the administration of the moral and strategic merits of the expansionist democratic cause. As Abrams points out from firsthand knowledge, it even took President Reagan some time in office fully to adopt the neoconservative perspective.<sup>31</sup>

## Notes on contributor

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/21520844.2018.1435120>



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<sup>29</sup>Elliott Abrams, “When You Can’t Stand with Your Candidate,” *Weekly Standard*, May 16, 2016.

<sup>30</sup>Maggie Haberman, Jonathan Weisman, and Eric Lichtblau, “Trump Overrules Tillerson, Rejecting Elliott Abrams for Deputy Secretary of State,” *New York Times*, February 10, 2017.

<sup>31</sup>Abrams, *Realism and Democracy*, 36–52.