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Should the U.S. promote (illiberal) democracy in the Middle East?

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This article reviews Shadi Hamid's book *The Problem of Democracy: America, the Middle East, and the Rise and Fall of an Idea*. It interrogates three key assumptions behind the author's call for abandoning a "stability first" strategy for a "democracy first" strategy in the Middle East. These include the claim that (1) liberalism and democracy are diverging, (2) Arab dictatorships are brittle, and (3) there is a stark tradeoff between prioritizing Arab-Israeli peace and Arab democracy.

KEYWORDS

democracy promotion, illiberal democracy, democratic minimalism, Middle East, Arab spring

1 Introduction

Shadi Hamid stands out as a democratic *possibilist*.¹ Many "realist" observers in the last few decades have questioned the feasibility and advisability of U.S. democracy promotion in the Middle East (e.g., [Takeyh and Gvosdev, 2003](#); [Boot, 2023](#); [Carothers et al., 2023](#)). Hamid, who transparently self-identifies as a liberal critic of realist efforts to "deemphasize values in international affairs" ([Hamid, 2022](#), 11, 16), directly challenges what we might call the realists' "non-possibilist" viewpoint. His book, *The Problem of Democracy*, can be read as an ambitious attempt to craft an "existence proof" that a democratic future is both possible and desirable in the Middle East.

What does Hamid hold to be the fundamental "problem of democracy"? In short, it is the problem of 'existential politics' amidst pernicious polarization: "How do we (as well as our opponents) respect democratic outcomes when the results threaten what we hold most dear?" ([Hamid, 2022](#), 3). The eminent democratic theorist Adam Przeworski pithily explains the problem of democracy this way:

"Elections peacefully process conflicts if the losers do not find their defeat excessively painful and if they expect to have a reasonable chance to win in the future, which also means that the winners do not inflict much pain on the losers and do not foreclose the possibility of being removed from office by elections.

The larger the stake in an election, the more likely it must be that the current losers could win future ones, which implies that in divided societies elections do not generate lasting social transformations.

The populist danger to democracy emerges when supporters of the incumbent government knowingly accept steps it takes to eradicate institutional constraints on its power or to

¹ For an elucidation of "possibilism" as a useful philosophy or mindset for conflict mediation, see [Ury \(2024\)](#).

entrench itself in office until it becomes almost impossible to remove it by peaceful means.

The polarization danger emerges when the stakes in an election become too high, so that the losers do not accept defeat.”²

The survival of democracy as a system of peacefully processing political conflict therefore depends in part on (1) institutional forbearance to avoid populist or majoritarian exploitation and (2) mutual toleration to avoid the pitfalls of polarization (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). Democracy is harder to sustain when politics is divided into two mutually distrustful camps (McCoy and Press, 2022), such as conservative nationalist vs. liberal camps in the West or Islamist vs. liberal camps in the Middle East.

There is a domestic as well as international dimension to the problem of mutual toleration. Whereas the domestic dimension usually receives much more attention in comparative studies of democracy, Hamid’s book stands out for attention to the international dimension in the context of arguing U.S. foreign policymakers should be more willing to tolerate Islamist (and anti-American) parties in power as the cost of promoting a more democratic future for the Middle East. Hamid argues that U.S. leaders in particular must drop their emphasis on promoting liberal values in the region, accept illiberal democracy in the region as preferable to liberal dictatorships, and most controversially, temper U.S. support for Israel. Hamid himself has doubts that Western leaders are willing to pay these costs. The book stands as testimony that the benefits are worth the risks and associated costs.

The focus of the review that follows is on interrogating the assumptions and logic of Hamid’s possibilist proof. I begin by briefly summarizing the book’s key arguments and evidence. I then proceed to engage with three key assumptions or claims underlying the possibilist claim. It is left to the reader to determine for themselves whether they, after reflecting on Hamid’s possibilist proof, would welcome the transition from a region awash with personalist dictatorships and monarchies to one composed of illiberal democracies. For my part, I share Hamid’s meta-assumption that more democracy would be good for the region. The lingering question is what constructive role, if any, can the West play in promoting Arab democratization, and whether or not the path to democracy in the Middle East must be a “sequenced one,” paved by or accompanied by the rise of liberal values.

2 The problem of democracy

In chapter 1, Hamid asks whether democracy is worth supporting (especially in the Middle East), and answers in the affirmative. He puts forward the idea of “democratic minimalism” (which he elaborates in greater detail in chapter 2), under which the U.S. should privilege promoting electoral democracy – that is, the thin concept of democracy focused on regular free and fair elections – over liberal democracy – a thicker concept of secular democracy including

individual protections against a ‘tyranny of the majority’ (Coppedge, 2012). Whereas realists today argue that it is time to decouple (or “de-risk”) the U.S. economy from China’s economy (e.g., Friedberg, 2024), Hamid says that “it is time to decouple U.S. support for democracy from U.S. support for liberalism” (Hamid, 2022, 13).

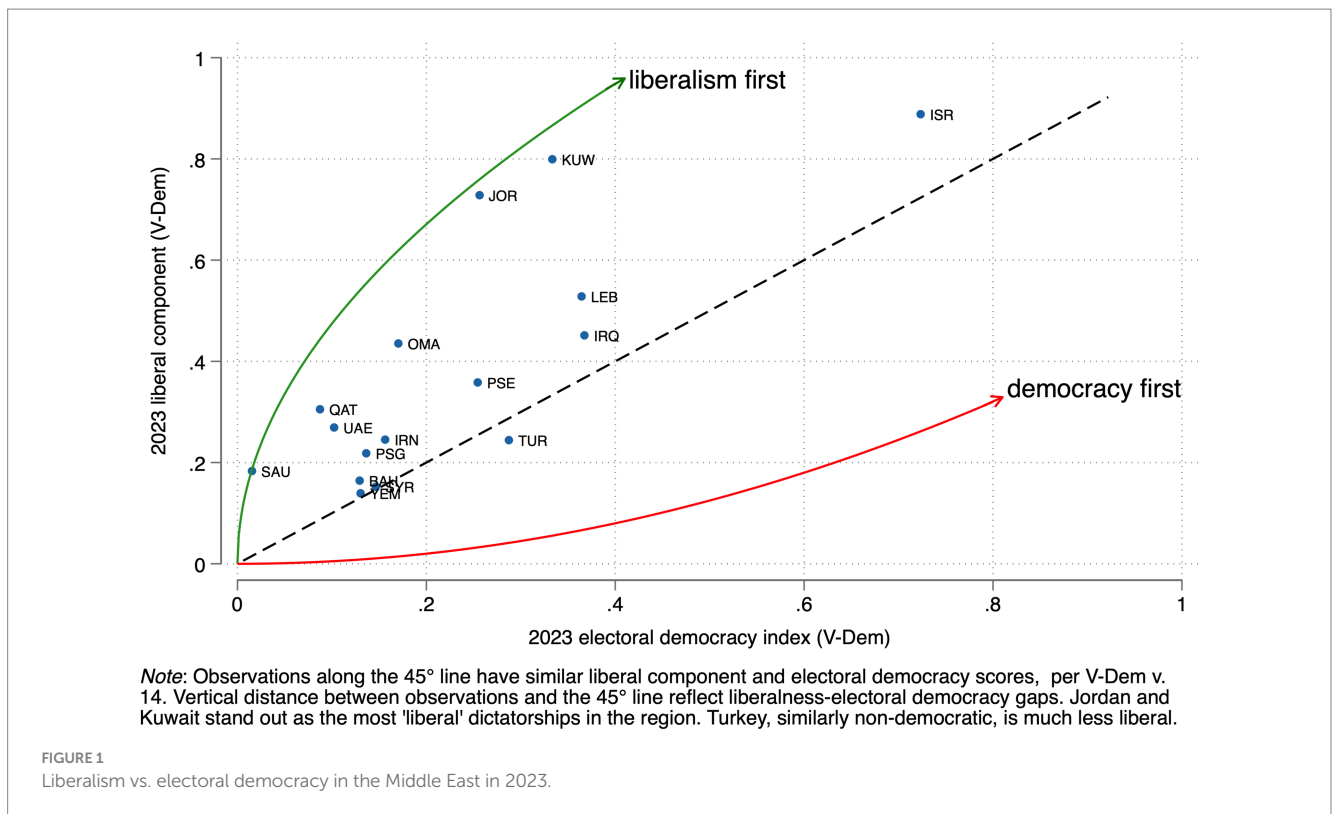
Hamid identifies (and rejects) the modern equivalent of the Cold War problem of “dictatorships and double standards,” under which geopolitical interests (i.e., containment of the Soviet Union and communism) justified support for (pro-American) right-wing dictatorships but opposition to (anti-American) leftist regimes (Kirkpatrick, 1979; Roháč, 2022). By extension, Hamid argues that it is short-sighted and ultimately self-defeating to support pro-American Arab autocrats for fear of empowering anti-American Islamists (Hamid, 2022, 5–6, 21). Though many have criticized America’s sins of commission in the Middle East – especially the Iraq War, which gave U.S. democracy promotion a bad name – Hamid focuses just as much on America’s sins of omission – what it has failed to do to promote democracy in the region. For example, Hamid laments the Bush administration cooling on its “Freedom Agenda” after Hamas won elections in Gaza in 2006 and abandoning democracy as a regional goal (Hamid, 2022, 8). He laments the U.S. not exerting its leverage to reduce Arab repression and promote Arab reform, and he particularly mourns the failure of the Obama administration to chart a new course in the region favoring democracy during and after the Arab Spring revolutions (Hamid, 2022, 153–60). The Trump administration draws less scrutiny, if only because Arab liberals had fewer expectations of a president that paid no priority to democracy.

Hamid advocates supplanting America’s “stability first” strategy with a “democracy first” one (Hamid, 2022, 24). Figure 1 shows Middle Eastern countries along two dimensions: the extent of “liberal” component on the y-axis (including judicial and legislative constraints on the executive and an equality before the law and individual liberties index) and the extent of electoral democracy on the x-axis, according to V-Dem (version 14) data (Coppedge et al., 2024). Israel is the only electoral democracy in the region, according to V-Dem. Jordan and Kuwait stand out as the most “liberal” among the rest, though even the least democratic country (Saudi Arabia) is slightly more liberal than democratic. Only Turkey is even marginally more democratic than liberal, per V-Dem data.

Given there aren’t many liberals in the Middle East, Hamid advises on pragmatic grounds eschewing an ambitious regional project of “ideological and cultural transformation” (Hamid, 2022, 17, 57, 70). In other words, Hamid recommends nudging countries in Figure 1 to the right in rather than up.

Hamid also rejects the alternative of de-prioritizing and ignoring the democracy deficit in the Middle East. Despite U.S. energy independence making the U.S. less reliant on Middle East oil, Hamid contends that the region still matters, if only because it is part of a contest for the Global South with China. Here Hamid is not above appealing to Western geopolitical concerns about the rise of China and “realist” discourse about a return of great power competition in the service of his liberal argument. I myself have made a similar type of appeal, having written recently about the need to double down on democracy promotion in Africa and the Sahel in part to counter China and Russia’s growing authoritarian influence (Chin and Bartos, 2024). For Hamid, the option of being an innocent bystander in the region is not possible given that the U.S. has never been a bystander,

² Drawn from a post on X on January 19, 2022. <https://x.com/AdamPrzeworski/status/1483931153455370242>



and is “already tipping the scales” in favor of authoritarian regimes across the Middle East (Hamid, 2022, 22–25).

Whereas many scholars have hotly debated for decades whether Islam is a problem for democracy or helps account for why there are so few democracies in the Arab world (e.g., Lewis, 1996; Fish, 2002; Karatnycky, 2002; Stepan and Robertson, 2003, 2004; Diamond, 2010; Fish, 2011; Koopmans, 2021), Hamid instead makes the case that the real problem in the Middle East is not political Islam per se but “the continued inability to accommodate competing conceptions of Islam’s role in public life” (Hamid, 2022, 18). A “democracy first” policy may promote procedural legitimacy even if ideological polarization makes it impossible for Islamists and non-Islamists to agree on the ends of politics. Thus, Hamid acknowledges the need for basic protections of political and civil liberties related to freedom of speech, expression, and assembly, which will generate few objections, but then he goes on to controversially argue that the U.S. should be willing to tolerate “social illiberalism” – such as “laws restricting the right to consume alcohol, have an abortion, or insult prophets and divine texts” – and should drop gender equality as a pillar of democracy promotion in the region (Hamid, 2022, 26–27). That is, democracy in the Middle East must have Islamic cultural-religious-legal characteristics.

What would Hamid’s “democracy first” strategy look like? First, the U.S. would exercise “maximal leverage” over Arab regimes – especially regional U.S. allies – to discourage repression and promote democratic reforms. Rather than only committing to democracy in anti-American adversaries like Iran, where the U.S. lacks linkage and leverage, Hamid argues that it is precisely among regional friends like Saudi Arabia and Egypt that the U.S. should exert more pressure (Hamid, 2022, 30–31). Scholars such as Levitsky and Way (2005, 2010) have argued that Western linkage and leverage generally promoted successful post-Cold War democratization, whereas regimes that

lacked linkage and leverage to the West were more likely to become “competitive authoritarian.” Hamid argues that the U.S. has not played this constructive role in the Middle East because its leaders refuse to exert leverage that it has over Middle Eastern allies (Hamid, 2022, 169, 172–74).³ In chapter 4, Hamid analyzes brief experiments with liberalization in the 1980s in Egypt, Jordan, and Algeria that were rolled back with tacit or explicit U.S. support after only a few years in the 1990s. In chapter 7, Hamid revives his proposal for a “Multilateral Endowment for Reform” (MER) – modeled on the Millennium Challenge Corporation but focused on democratic reform – to incentivize soft authoritarian regimes in the Middle East to embark on democratic reforms (Hamid, 2022, 200–202).

Second, the U.S. would prioritize regional democratization over progress on Arab-Israeli peace. Hamid critiques the U.S. strategy of prioritizing Israeli security and would invert the “peace first, democracy (maybe) later” that has been in place since at least the Oslo process of the 1990s. U.S. policy since has given a pass to repressive regimes in Egypt and “soft authoritarians” like Jordan and Morocco simply because they have agreed to normal relations with Israel (Hamid, 2022, 35–40). Hamid argues that the U.S. should privilege “publics over regimes” (Hamid, 2022, 152) and thus not protect “client states” like Jordan or tolerate “reformist” Arab dictators just because they are willing to sign Abraham Accords with Israel or otherwise align with U.S. interests (Hamid, 2022, 100).

³ Hamid is not the first or only scholar to make this critique, but Hamid’s is amongst the clearest and most comprehensive in making it. For similar critiques of the Biden administration in particular, see El Kurd (2023).

Third, the U.S. would accept the electoral victories and rule of Islamist parties so long as they follow the democratic rules of the game. Hamid explicitly addresses the “problem of Islam” in chapter 3. The starting point is the observation that “religion is not going anywhere in the Middle East” (Hamid, 2022, 58), that consensus between Arab Islamists and Arab liberals is impossible, and that repression of Islamists by Arab dictators in the name of liberalism is unsustainable (Hamid, 2022, 66). It follows that any “democracy first” strategy will have to accommodate Islamist parties even over the objections of liberal activists in the region. The U.S. should not sponsor or tolerate “veto coups” like the coup that blocked the Islamic Salvation Front from taking power in Algeria in 1992 or that ousted Mohamed Morsi’s Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt in 2013 (Hamid, 2022, 77, 108–9, chapter 5, 167–68). Hamid, citing research by Tarek Masoud, notes that Islamist parties are rarely the cause of democratic declines in Muslim-majority countries (Hamid, 2022, 112), and thus concludes fears that Islamist parties will be trojan horses for anti-Western illiberal dictatorships is overblown. Yes, Islamists who won democratic elections would in all likelihood seek to impose some illiberal and symbolic social policies – like imposing restrictions on alcohol consumption – but Hamid argues in chapter 8 that Islamists in power would likely not implement revolutionary sharia law programs.

3 Three “democracy first” assumptions

The Problem of Democracy is a book rich with provocative ideas backed by copious qualitative evidence and revealing elite interviews. In the interest of space, I focus narrowly on interrogating three key assumptions that underlay Hamid’s “democracy first” strategy for the Middle East.

3.1 Assumption/Claim 1

Liberalism is diverging from democracy, and the U.S. should promote the latter over the former in the Middle East (Hamid, 2022, 9).

Explicit in the argument for “democratic minimalism” (thin electoral democracy) is that the U.S. cannot (and therefore should not try to) promote what we might call “democratic maximalism” (thick liberal democracy) in the Middle East. Hamid is possibilist concerning prospects for Arab electoral democracy but pessimistic concerning prospects for Arab liberalism (Hamid, 2022, 57). For Hamid, key cases of tension between democracy and liberalism in the Middle East include Algeria in the 1990s, Egypt and the Palestinian territories, and the Arab Spring in the 2010s (Hamid, 2022, 47).

Hamid seemingly shares realists’ pessimism about any grand effort to “liberalize” or “westernize” the Middle East but sheds realists’ more general pessimism about the suitability of procedural democracy in the region. That is, Hamid argues that U.S. policymakers should focus on promoting democracy as a *means* (“of governing and rotating power”) rather than evaluating democracy as an *end* that will favor liberal or secular or pro-Western policies and outcomes (Hamid, 2022, 55). He thus rejects the “sequencing paradigm” that prioritizes liberalization before democratization (Hamid, 2022, 73–75), and discounts fears such as those expressed by Mansfield and Snyder

(2007) that democratization (at least without liberalism) may instead unleash forces of ethnic nationalism, polarization, and conflict.

Setting aside the ambiguous normative question of whether it would always be morally preferable to favor illiberal democracy over liberal dictatorship, a nagging empirical question remains: Are liberal elements truly separable from electoral democracy for the latter to thrive and survive? Over two decades ago, Zakaria (2003) observed that liberty and democracy do not always go together. But the conventional wisdom that followed critiqued U.S. democracy promotion with being overly pre-occupied with multi-party elections and neglecting liberalism promotion – leading to the rise of a illiberal democracies, or regimes in what Carothers (2002) called a “political gray zone.” Hamid attempts to invert Zakaria’s call to prioritize constitutional liberalism over democracy in the Middle East (Zakaria, 2003, 151, 156), but not all will be convinced to abandon liberalism so easily.

For starters, data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project suggest that different dimensions of democracy are highly correlated, with the Spearman’s rank-order correlation coefficient between the V-Dem electoral democracy (polyarchy) index and liberal component above 0.9 in the post-Cold War era (if anything this correlation has gone up not down compared to earlier historical periods). Generally, then, “countries that perform well on one aspect of democracy tend to perform well also on other aspects and vice versa” (Knutson and Skaaning, 2022, 52). The Middle East region, by contrast, is a democratic laggard across all dimensions of democracy. According to the most recent “regimes of the world” classification (Lührmann et al., 2018), only one country in the region, Israel, qualifies as an electoral democracy, with most being “closed autocracies.”

Hamid seems relatively sanguine that Arab electoral democracy can survive without liberals. Yet there is evidence that the presence of liberal or “emancipative” values in a society is important for the survival of democracy (Welzel, 2021a, 2021b). Individuals with socially illiberal values and illiberal conceptions of democracy tend to be weaker supporters of democracy, and this leads to democratic deficits (Alexander and Welzel, 2017). Data from the World Values Survey suggests that the Middle East is also a laggard in terms of liberal values (this would be no shock to Hamid), which should give us pause that illiberal democracies in the Middle East would not soon backslide into illiberal dictatorships. Tunisian democracy died in Kais Saied’s 2021 self-coup, democracy in Turkey under Erdoğan died in the wake of the July 2016 coup attempt that enabled an illiberal crackdown, Hamas won elections in Gaza nearly two decades ago but then proceeded to rule Gaza undemocratically.

3.2 Assumption/Claim 2

Authoritarian allies seem durable and stable, but in fact they are brittle and survive mainly by coercion. U.S. leaders have a status quo bias (Hamid, 2022, 165) and therefore underestimate the risk of an Arab Spring 2.0 in the years ahead (Hamid, 2022, 30–31).

Hamid “believes that authoritarian regimes are unpredictable in predictable ways” and that the impossible “can become possible sooner than we might expect” (Hamid, 2022, 203). Though Hamid does not claim Arab Spring 2.0 is inevitable or likely, others have (Muasher, 2018). The assumption that authoritarian regimes are brittle precisely “because they lack the consent of the governed” (Hamid,

2022, 183) helps Hamid's argument insofar as he seeks to challenge the U.S. status quo bias in the region. If change is coming anyways, would not it be better not to side with Arab dictators today, which will only fuel anti-Americanism whenever new popular regimes do come to power?⁴

As someone who has taught a course on *Nonviolent Conflict and Revolution* at Carnegie Mellon University since 2017, I was particularly interested in Hamid's discussion of "why nonviolence does not work in the Middle East" (Hamid, 2022, 186–90). Here Hamid acknowledges that "One of the sadder lessons of the Arab Spring is that repression 'works,' at least in the near term" (Hamid, 2022, 186). The crucial reason he infers is because "Citizens were no match for leaders who were willing to shoot and kill their own people. And one reason they were willing to arrest, torture, and kill is because they knew they could do so with little fear of sanctions" (Hamid, 2022, 186).

Yet Hamid overstates the importance of external actors for the outcome of nonviolent revolutions. He misreads *Why Civil Resistance Works* (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011) as "highlighting the central role of external actors in the success of failure of nonviolent campaigns" (Hamid, 2022, 187). In fact, that landmark work found international interventions to be a "double-edged sword," and found no effect of either sanctions or state sponsorship on the success of nonviolent campaigns (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011, 52–55). In more recent work, Chenoweth and Stephan (2021) find that some types of external support do in fact matter but that "external support is always secondary to local actors." Another recent meta-review similarly found mixed evidence for the role of external support of nonviolent campaigns, with none making success fool proof (Jackson et al., 2022).

Though Hamid faults the Obama administration with not exerting more leverage to empower revolutionary success during the Arab spring, some scholars of the Arab Spring actually credit an "iron cage of liberalism" – in which the presence of a liberal patron constrained client dictators – with helping explain why Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt had trouble repressing protests and were ousted and Arab monarchies and other illiberal regimes survived (Ritter, 2015). In my own research, my co-authors and I have found that security force personalism is associated with fewer successful mass uprisings, and that high levels of security personalism across the Middle East may help explain why so few Arab Spring revolutions succeeded (Chin et al., 2023). To the extent that U.S. support facilitates Arab personalism, the U.S. may have had indirect effects on undermining Arab protest, but these errors are long-term in nature and not Obama's unforced errors.

For Hamid, the lack of international (Western) support means Islamists have little incentive to lead protests or take on the role of genuine opposition party since they privilege self-preservation and civil society initiatives (Hamid, 2022, 190–94). To overcome this reticence, and make Arab Spring 2.0 more likely, Hamid recommends that top U.S. officials declare "unequivocally, for the first time, that Washington would oppose repression against Islamist-led protests"

(Hamid, 2022, 195). I am not aware of any similar preemptive declarations in the past to oppose repression of non-Islamist-led protests. Yet this has not stopped mass mobilization from rising around the world in recent years. According to recent data (Ortiz et al., 2022, 16), the number of protests in the Middle East and North Africa declined from 2012 through 2017 but has started to increase again since 2018. An Arab Spring 2.0 is certainly possible, even if it is not likely in forecasting terms (Pinckney and Daryakenari, 2022).

3.3 Assumption/Claim 3

America faces a choice between Arab-Israeli peace and Arab democracy.

In the Cold War, concern with minimizing Soviet influence and making America indispensable was the lodestar of Henry Kissinger's "realist" Middle East policy since his shuttle diplomacy of 1973. As "master of the game" (Indyk, 2021), Kissinger was the chief engineer of what Hamid calls an "architecture" (pg. 158) or durable regional order in the Middle East that put America in the service of regional (authoritarian) stability and Arab-Israeli peace at the cost of Arab democracy. This order secured the switch of Egypt from Soviet to American sphere of influence in the Cold War and Arab-Israeli peace initiatives from the Camp David Accords to Oslo Accords to the Abraham Accords.

The perceived tension between defending Israeli democracy and promoting Arab democracy can be formulated as a kind of "trolley problem." What if U.S. policymakers could "hit a switch" and save (in reality, birth) Arab democracy, but in the process this came at the cost of killing Israel? This is not a tradeoff many if any American policymakers would be willing to make. Hamid also argues that such a thought experiment poses a false choice. He favors a "third way," the option of prioritizing Arab democracy *and* providing Israel ironclad security guarantees, while arguing that it is "close to unfathomable" that new Arab democracies would attack Israel (Hamid, 2022, 163). Yet regional war looks more fathomable in a post-October 7 world. Though Iran evidently rebuffed Hamas overtures to join in its surprise attack in 2023 (Bergman et al., 2024), Israel has been at war with Hamas in Gaza (and the West Bank) and with Hezbollah in Lebanon. In this context, it is not clear why the choice here is "either/or" and not one of both peace with Israel and Arab democracy.

4 Conclusion

Hamid concludes *The Problem of Democracy* in chapter 10 with a brief reflection on power and purpose in U.S. foreign policy. If the arc of history is to bend towards justice, "someone needs to do the bending" (Hamid, 2022, 249). For Hamid, for better or worse, America remains what Madeline Albright once called the "indispensable nation," though its window to act credibly in favor of democracy may be limited. For a democratic possibilist, complacency and indifference are enemies. In the case of China, a belief in what Michael Mandelbaum (2004) once called the "liberal theory of history" – free markets and globalization would promote economic development, economic development would promote democracy, and democracy in turn would promote peace – led many American observers to believe that the Chinese Communist

⁴ It is not totally clear what costs America would pay for its current sins as Hamid sees them (or what changing course now would do to change those costs). Anti-American sentiment was significant in South Korea, for example, given the U.S. had backed pro-American dictatorships, but this has not stopped democratic Korea from allying with the U.S.

Party was on the wrong side of history. This facilitated the convenient idea – what Mann (2007) called “the China fantasy” – that trade would democratize China indirectly, and thus there was no need to directly promote democracy in China. Hamid documents a different kind of American “Middle East fantasy” that is premised on a more realist theory of history – one that suggests the U.S. can preserve regional hegemony by protecting alliances with Israel and friendly Arab dictatorships and balancing anti-American regimes.

Hamid catalogs a history of missed democratic opportunities, but, perhaps, Arab democracy still remains possible. Yet, roughly a year after *The Problem of Democracy* was published, Hamas’s surprise October 7 terror attack shook Israel to its core, triggered a devastating and ongoing Israeli military response, which has precipitated a growing humanitarian crisis, counter-mobilization by Iran’s “axis of resistance,” and dragged the region to the brink of an escalating regional war. In this context, it is hard not to be much more pessimistic today about the feasibility of some of Hamid’s recommendations – especially related to embracing Islamists regardless of their anti-Israel and anti-American positions. Israeli democracy itself is at a crossroads, and a two-state solution leading to Palestinian democracy seems as remote today as any point in living memory. And yet, a democratic possibilist must think about the day after. The current conflict will end one day. And when it does, the moral imperative for Palestinian and Arab democracy will be as strong as ever. As Abramowitz (2023), then-president of Freedom House wrote only a month after October 7, for Israelis and Palestinians, peace and democracy will have to go hand in hand. To achieve these twin outcomes, the United States will need to credibly commit to a new, better Freedom Agenda. Even if the U.S. does not pursue a “democracy first” strategy, it cannot pursue a “democracy last” strategy.

Author contributions

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

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