Chapter Title: Introduction

Book Title: Artists and the Arab Uprisings
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Published by: RAND Corporation

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.com/stable/10.7249/j.ctt3fgzkf.7

Introduction

After decades of authoritarianism, a wave of political change and unrest began to sweep across the Middle East and Africa in early 2011. These dramatic revolts across the Arab region magnified the shortcomings in Arab governance that regional analysts had identified for some time.[1] The protests, or what many now refer to as the "Arab uprisings" stemmed from a variety of factors, including the suppression of political opposition, systemic human rights violations, government corruption, the concentration of wealth and power among those associated with autocratic rulers, high unemployment, poverty, and, finally, the refusal of Arab youth to accept the status quo.

The United States has, for the most part, embraced these changes, recognizing the uprisings as an indigenous process with the potential to open up a pathway for democratic development. While welcoming these momentous changes, U.S officials and regional observers realize that making a successful transition from authoritarian rule to a democratic society will not be easy and will require change along multiple vectors. Examples include economic reform, establishing durable democratic institutions, and managing deep societal divisions along ethnic and religious lines. This report focuses on one vector whose power and

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[1] See, for example, the series of reports issued by the United Nations Development Programme's Regional Bureau for Arab States between 2002–2009, *The Arab Human Development Report: Creating Opportunities for the Coming Generation* (2002), *Building A Knowledge Society* (2003), *Towards Freedom in the Arab World* (2004), *Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World* (2005), and *Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries* (2009).

importance is often underestimated and neglected: the cultural and artistic arena.

Broadly speaking, culture is a medium through which ideologies and norms find expression and are challenged. Ideologies and norms are critical because they provide individuals with frameworks for understanding how society should function. It is these frameworks that form the basis for what is possible in the "higher" spheres of law and politics.[2] In today's Middle East, Arab artists and writers have the potential to play a critical role in shaping the ideological framework of these countries' elite and newly galvanized publics.[3] Artists can influence public debates and promote tolerance and reform in countries undergoing or on the brink of fundamental political transitions.

Underlying many of the political, social, and economic challenges facing the Arab world is a contest among government authorities, extremist movements, and reformist voices. In the cultural sphere, reformists are squeezed between the bounds of acceptable discourse set by rulers who fear freedom of expression and conservative religious groups that fear the liberalization of social values. Governments and some Islamist groups fear artistic works by alternative voices because they play such a vital role in shaping the ideologies and ideas that can take hold in societies.

It is important to note that regional artists favoring tolerance, democracy, and nonviolence can come from both secular and religious backgrounds. Consequently, support for regional artists does not suggest support only for artists with secular orientations or opposition to religiously inspired art. In some instances, art drawing on religious themes may resonate more strongly with people in conservative societies and prove more effective in advocating such principles as tolerance and nonviolence than secular material.

The way this struggle is evolving varies widely across the region. In some countries, such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, the revolts have

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[2]   Hicham Ben Abdallah El Alaoui, "The Split in Arab Culture," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 22, No. 1, January 2011.

[3]   In this report, we use a broad definition of the term *artist*. We view an artist as a person who practices any of the various creative arts, such as a sculptor, painter, writer, or filmmaker.

opened up new opportunities for cultural engagement, although at the same time, deep domestic divisions over cultural policy have emerged. In addition, while the uprisings have brought many changes to the cultural sphere, the basic institutional structures of the previous regimes that limited and censored artistic works remain in place. In other countries where uprisings are still under way or where regimes have been able to maintain their hold on power, the cultural sphere is one part of a wider struggle to remove or reform repressive autocratic regimes.

Cultural issues can be difficult and rocky territory in the midst of political upheaval. Popular revolutions often unleash renewed nationalism that can lead to a backlash over foreign assistance seen as impinging on a state's sovereignty. It is therefore understandable that U.S. officials and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) often shy away from confronting these issues, preferring to focus on more traditional programming, such as economic reform and development. Such approaches unfortunately underestimate the contribution that artistic freedom can make to reform in other spheres and the centrality of freedom of expression for establishing democratic societies. Previous RAND research also suggests that exposure to the arts can affect not only individuals but also societies, connecting "people more deeply to the world and open[ing] them to new ways of seeing and experiencing the world."[4] One finding that is particularly relevant to the Middle East context is that arts experiences can promote greater "receptivity to new perspectives and tolerance for others."[5]

Indeed, many regional artists recognize the power of art in shaping societal change (see box). The critical challenge is finding the most effective ways to support artists and free artistic expression while avoiding as much as possible becoming embroiled in contentious domestic political issues in ways that ultimately backfire. This report sets out to begin addressing this challenge.

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[4]   Kevin F. McCarthy, Elizabeth H. Ondaatje, Laura Zakaras, and Arthur Brooks, *Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate About the Benefits of the Arts*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-218-WF, 2004, p. xvi.

[5]   McCarthy et al., 2004, p. 69.

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What Arab Artists Say About the Power of Art for Societal Change

"We have the greatest weapon. We have 35-millimeter with 24 bullets a second. . . . That's really the best gun, the best tool, the best weapon you can have to talk about peace, to talk about human beings, to talk about who you are."

— *Moroccan-born filmmaker Daniele Suissa*

"My conviction, my mission, is based on the belief that the only way to beat extremism is through arts and culture."

— *Kuwaiti entrepreneur Naif Al-Mutawa*

"Art is about poking different points of views. . . . It's not about giving answers, it's about raising questions and offering a different way to look at things."

— *Egyptian artist Mariam El-Quessny*

"I believe music can change society for the better. . . . Music is one of the best ways to spread awareness, especially as it doesn't just communicate with the brain, but also touches people's emotions."

— *Egyptian singer Dina El Wedidi*

"What's very interesting is that a lot of women are in the arts because it's seen as a safe arena, but ironically you can really instigate a lot of change through the arts."

— *Kuwait-based art journalist Mohamad Kadry*

SOURCES: Shirley Jahad, "USC-Affiliated School Graduates Filmmakers from Mideast and North Africa," 89.3 KPCC (Southern California Public Radio), May 23, 2011; Christopher M. Schroeder, "Naif Al-Mutawa Fights to Bring 'The 99' and Its Message to Wide U.S. Audience," *Washington Post*, October 11, 2011; Deena Adel, "Reviving Revolution: The Role of Art in an Uncertain Egypt," *Global Post*, November 5, 2011; "Gilberto Gil and Dina El Wedidi: A Year of Mentoring," Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative, 2012–2013; Mohamad Kadry, "Winning Hearts Through the Arts," *Khaleej Times* (Dubai), March 11, 2012.

The Cultural Dimension During the Cold War

Unfortunately today, the cultural dimension is a largely neglected piece of U.S. foreign policy.[6] This has not always been the case. During the Cold War, for example, the U.S. government understood that culture was an important component of national power that could assist the United States in achieving its foreign policy objectives. American diplomats of the early years of the Cold War recognized that art and culture would play a vital role in the ideological struggle against the Soviet Union.[7] Policymakers, such as George Kennan and Paul Nitze, instituted a wide variety of cultural programs, including magazine and book exchanges, radio broadcasts that promoted dissident writers and artists living behind the Iron Curtain, and cultural exchanges between artists in the West and East. These programs illustrated that creative works could illuminate alternative views and ways of life, eroding support for authoritarian systems in the Soviet orbit.[8]

Cold War diplomats understood implicitly that the informational and cultural spheres were an important component of a grand strategy. In the 1950s, one of President Eisenhower's major initiatives was a strategy of cultural infiltration against communist societies. President Eisenhower viewed U.S. cultural programs as a vital method for exploiting communist societies' ideological and cultural vulnerabilities.[9] The Eisenhower administration sought to use cultural contacts between the West and the Soviet Union to break down the isolation of communist peoples and to introduce modern concepts and reform ideas to key social groups. The hope was that more open discussions of liberal ideas would subtly undermine the intellectual foundations of communist societies.

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[6] Richard T. Arndt, *The First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century*, Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2005.

[7] Lowell Schwartz, *Political Warfare Against the Kremlin: U.S. and British Propaganda Policy at the Beginning of the Cold War*, London: UK Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

[8] Robert English, *Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals and the End of the Cold War*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

[9] Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945–1961*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.

To break through the Iron Curtain, the United States and other Western countries used a variety of methods to communicate with Soviet and Eastern European audiences. Among the instruments used were short-wave radio broadcasts, cultural exchanges, trade fairs, and Western book and magazine distribution in the region. These Western messages targeted intellectuals, who were believed to constitute public opinion, to the extent that there was one in communist societies.

Among the more notable aspects of the U.S. Cold War cultural policy was its support for dissenting intellectuals and writers. In the 1960s, the U.S. government supported Radio Liberty and its publishing arm, Bedford Publishing Company, which began highlighting *samizdat*, or dissident work. On the radio and in print, Radio Liberty disseminated the work of the dissent movement and publicized it to a wide audience. Through its book and magazine program, it distributed work banned by communist authorities, such as Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. Finally, the United States sought to link Western museums and artists with their counterparts behind the Iron Curtain. This provided repressed artists a means of support and exposure to cultural trends in the West.

In hindsight, U.S. policymakers' embrace of a policy of cultural infiltration was a pivotal turning point in the Cold War. The well-known policy of containment could only achieve a long-term stalemate in the Cold War: It could not achieve victory. Military and political containment was a mechanism to stop further Soviet advances; it could not, by itself, weaken Soviet power or cause Soviet leaders to rethink their approach to international relations. Ultimately, what containment bought the West was time to show Soviet leaders and the Soviet people that their economic, social, and political system was inferior to the West's and should be abandoned. The policy of cultural infiltration was the key component of national power in communicating this message to the people of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Although it is dangerous to draw too many parallels between the Cold War and U.S. policy in the Arab world today, the importance of cultural policies in advancing national interests is a critical lesson. That said, the context of the Middle East today differs significantly from

that of Cold War Europe. There will likely be little receptivity to the imposition of U.S. culture and norms into Arab societies, and attempts to do so would only backfire and increase anti-American sentiment, which is already high.

But the Arab world is producing its own creative works that offer messages of tolerance and nonviolence that can be far more effective in the battle of ideas than works coming from the West.[10] Thus, while the idea that the cultural arena is critical to shaping the future development of these societies is certainly similar to the Cold War experience, the means of influencing regional debates cannot originate in the West. The question is how can U.S. policies adjust to help support regional voices in ways that will bolster rather than undermine them?

Recent Shifts in U.S. Middle East Policy

While some anchors in U.S. policy toward the Middle East remain, a number of fundamental policy adjustments have emerged since the Arab uprisings. These adjustments suggest that a policy of supporting artists and cultural expression fits extremely well with broader U.S. objectives in the region, even if such support will need to be channeled in ways that differ significantly from the Cold War experience.

U.S. policy toward the Middle East has been a consistent balancing act between pursuing U.S. national security interests and promoting democracy, development, and freedom in the region. Decisions about how to pursue these sometimes conflicting objectives have only grown more complicated in light of the Arab uprisings. The uprisings and political changes occurring in the Arab world have introduced new factors into the equation, such as the increasing role of public opin-

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[10] RAND has engaged in work exploring cultural output in the Arab world that promotes tolerance. See, for example, Gail L. Zellman, Jeffrey Martini, and Michal Perlman, *Identifying Arabic-Language Materials for Children That Promote Tolerance and Critical Thinking*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, TR-856-OSD, 2011, and Lowell H. Schwartz, Todd C. Helmus, Dalia Dassa Kaye, and Nadia Oweidat, *Barriers to the Broad Dissemination of Creative Works in the Arab World*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-879-OSD, 2009.

ion, the rise of Islamist parties and factions, and the weakening of state security authorities. Thus, in many ways, while the broad policy choices the United States faces remain the same, the overall strategic environment has shifted.

In light of the unprecedented developments across the Arab world, the Obama administration has adjusted its policies in several ways that could have an impact on cultural policies toward the Middle East. The first shift has been to embrace the spirit of change in the region by declaring that it is "the policy of the United States to promote reform across the region and to support transitions to democracy."[11] In countries where political changes have occurred, such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, U.S. policy has focused on achieving a stable and nonviolent transition to democratic civilian rule. Part of this effort has been to reach out to the new (or newly empowered) political actors that have emerged after long-standing periods of authoritarian rule.

Complicating this transition and U.S. policy in general has been the rise of Islamist parties that have often embraced policies that appear contrary to such U.S. values as religious freedom and gender equality. In both Egypt and Tunisia, Islamist parties, banned by the old regimes, have emerged as the largest parties in parliament and are leading the government. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party and the main Salafist group, an-Nour, combined to win nearly three quarters of the seats in the lower house of parliament.[12] And in Tunisia, an-Nahda outpolled its nearest competitor by a nearly two-to-one margin. These gains were achieved through elections that, although not perfect, likely accurately reflect public opinion in these countries.

President Obama addressed U.S. policy toward these Islamist parties in a May 19, 2011, speech that provides a broad framework for U.S. efforts in the region:

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[11] Barack Obama, President of the United States, "Remarks by the President on Middle East and North Africa," transcript of a speech at the U.S. Department of State, Washington, D.C., May 19, 2011.

[12] That body has since been dissolved over a dispute on the constitutionality of the electoral law.

Let me be clear, America respects the right of all peaceful and law-abiding voices to be heard, even if we disagree with them. And sometimes we profoundly disagree with them.

We look forward to working with all who embrace genuine and inclusive democracy. What we will oppose is an attempt by any group to restrict the rights of others, and to hold power through coercion and not consent. Because democracy depends not only on elections, but also strong and accountable institutions, and the respect for the rights of minorities.[13]

In light of this policy, U.S. officials have met with and are working with the leaders of such groups as Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood.[14] Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, previously a member of the Muslim Brotherhood's executive apparatus, met with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during a visit to the United States in late September 2012. The Obama administration also worked together closely with President Morsi to broker a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas after an escalating conflict in November 2012. Despite such collaboration, significant policy differences between the two countries—including over cultural issues—have emerged. U.S. officials have made it clear to regional governments in transition that continued U.S. support is contingent upon their respect for some basic principles, particularly minority rights and gender equality, and their continued progress toward democratization.

Carnegie scholar Thomas Carothers notes the Obama administration has taken steps to support democratization but has also avoided getting out in front of the wave of political change taking place across the Middle East. He posits that this cautious response reflects several concerns. First, there is a degree of uncertainty about how the uprisings will affect key U.S. interests in the region, such as counterterrorism and the security of the state of Israel. Second, U.S. policymakers

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[13] Obama, 2011.

[14] For an overview of U.S engagement efforts with the Muslim Brotherhood, see Jeffrey Martini, Dalia Dassa Kaye, and Erin York, *The Muslim Brotherhood, Its Youth, and Implications for U.S. Engagement*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2012.

wish to avoid situations that force it to sever all ties with a leader who may end up staying in power, or with countries that help the United States maintain significant military assets. (The cautious U.S. approach to repression in Bahrain, for example, is often attributed to the presence of the U.S. Fifth Fleet in that country.) And, finally, the Obama administration is wary of putting itself at the center of potential political change in other countries because of concerns that doing so might discredit those pushing for democracy and force the United States to take on a level of responsibility over events that it is unlikely to be able to fulfill.[15]

Despite these concerns, U.S. policy has clearly shifted from the default position of supporting Arab autocrats in the name of stability toward a more nuanced position of generally supporting reform and democratic change where unrest is occurring. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made this point in a November 7, 2011, speech at the National Democracy Institute:

> We begin by rejecting the false choice between progress and stability. For years, dictators told their people they had to accept autocrats they knew to avoid the extremists they feared. And too often, we accepted that narrative ourselves. Now, America did push for reform, but often not hard enough or publicly enough. And today, we recognize that the real choice is between reform and unrest.[16]

The second major shift in U.S. policy has been the emphasis on broadening engagement beyond government-to-government interactions. In its first quadrennial diplomacy and development review, the U.S. Department of State highlighted the growing importance of nonstate actors in global affairs and the increasing role public opinion plays in international relations. The review noted that achieving U.S. policy

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[15] Thomas Carothers, *Democracy Policy Under Obama*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012.

[16] Hillary Clinton, U.S. Secretary of State, "Keynote Address at the National Democratic Institute's 2011 Democracy Awards Dinner," transcript of speech, National Democratic Institute, Washington, D.C., November 7, 2011.

objectives in the 21st century requires American diplomats to reach out to civil society and build relationships with "activists, organizations, congregations, and journalists working through peaceful means to make their countries better."[17] The result of this review has been increasing efforts by the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to strengthen U.S. cooperation with partners beyond the state.

The State Department and broader U.S. government efforts to engage civil society have a number of components that are relevant to cultural diplomacy and artistic freedom in the Middle East. One component of the effort is to expand and strengthen people-to-people relationships. This involves U.S. citizens communicating and working with counterparts abroad. Interactions with women and youth are viewed as especially important. Public-private partnerships are another component of the State Department's engagement strategy. These partnerships are viewed as advantageous because they add resources and capacity, and they are able to establish a presence in places that U.S. diplomacy normally cannot access. They also provide an ability to work with organizations and individuals overseas who have reservations about being connected to activities directly sponsored by the U.S. government. This concern is particularly relevant in the Middle East context.

U.S. cultural policies, if properly directed and coordinated, could play an important role in supporting these shifts in U.S. foreign policy. Ultimately, the democratic transitions that have been embraced by the United States can take root only if the culture and ideology of the region's peoples are accepting of them. Regional artists and the creative works they produce can play an important role in shaping societal views in ways that are supportive of a democratic society over the longer term. U.S. policy can support this process by assisting these artists in overcoming the barriers they face in the creation and dissemination of their works, even if it must find ways to do so that do not involve direct U.S. government support.

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[17] U.S. Department of State, *Leading Through Civilian Power: The First Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review*, Washington, D.C., December 15, 2010.

Robust support to regional artists also fits with the emphasis on broadening engagement beyond government-to-government interaction. Supporting artists and cultural freedom can be a vital component of the larger process of building civil society in ways that support a peaceful and democratic state. Supporting regional artists should be viewed as a way to strengthen and expand U.S. cooperation with partners beyond the state. But the process of building connections should be approached primarily through NGOs. This report outlines an array of nongovernmental activities already under way to support regional artists. That said, the continued barriers facing regional artists suggest that new public-private partnership models may be necessary to fully empower this community in the future.

Organization of This Report

Understanding how to promote artistic freedom requires first identifying the obstacles that Arab artists currently face. RAND is one of the few research institutions that have analyzed this issue.[18] Building on previous work, this report seeks to understand how the Arab uprisings have or have not changed the barriers to the production and dissemination of creative works. Chapter Two explores the impact of the uprisings on the ability of Egyptian and other Middle Eastern artists to produce and distribute their work. It reflects fieldwork recently conducted in Egypt, which is the most populous Arab state to undergo a democratic transition. This chapter also reviews how Egypt's cultural policy has shifted since the revolution and the stated policies of the major Egyptian political parties that are likely to influence future decisionmaking.

Chapters Three and Four investigate ongoing government and nongovernmental efforts to support artists in the Middle East. Chapter Three explores current U.S. government attempts to support and promote Arab artists, U.S. government connections with the NGO

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[18] Schwartz et al., 2009. Also see Cynthia P. Schneider and Kristina Nelson, *Mightier Than the Sword: Arts and Culture in the U.S.-Muslim World Relationship*, Washington, D.C.: Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, June 2008.

community, and gaps and shortfalls in these efforts. Chapter Four reviews and analyzes the activities of NGOs (some of which are supported by European governments) involved in fostering artistic talent and production in Middle East. It concludes with a discussion of the serious challenges regional artists face despite increasing nongovernmental support.

The analysis of the challenges facing regional artists in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, as well as the overview of governmental and nongovernmental efforts to support Arab artists, underscores continued gaps and areas for improvement. Building on this analysis, Chapter Five suggests policy recommendations for better leveraging current policies to more effectively support regional artists. That chapter also develops strategies for the broader and more effective support and distribution of creative works throughout the region, particularly through media, like film, that can reach large numbers of people. We also suggest a "roadmap" for the U.S. government and civil society counterparts to implement a strategy to support artistic freedom in the Middle East. Finally, we propose an entirely new model to support the arts in the region, a "regional endowment for Arab arts," which would allow the marshaling of regional government resources and private funding to support the arts through an independent regional institution.