THE ARAB WORLD’S DEMOCRACY DEFICIT: ANOMALY OR HARBINGER?

For decades the Arab world has puzzled outside observers by its lack of progress toward democracy, despite rapid urbanization, rising literacy, and a growing middle class. The term “Arab exceptionalism was coined to describe this. The pro-democracy Arab uprisings of 2011 seemed to end this exceptionalism, but autocracy soon reasserted itself. Moreover, democracy seems to be in retreat everywhere, raising the question “can the Arab world help us understand the weakening of democratic practice?” This course will explore the evolution of Arab autocracy over the past half century with consideration of the critical role of outside powers in shaping outcomes.

I do not have firm answers to the Arab democracy puzzle. I have written about it and know the relevant literature well. So, I propose to be a sherpa rather than a guru. I also want to be able to adjust the trajectory of the course to respond to your interests without abandoning the central focus. My preference is for an interactive format, but that will depend on the number of participants.


Course Schedule

**Week One:** the Cold War and the ‘inevitability of democracy’

**Week Two:** the democracy deficit in the Arab world—major explanations

**Week Three:** the post-colonial social contract and the Nasserist paradigm

**Week Four:** rentier states and ‘crony capitalism’

**Week Five:** Aborted transitions; liberals against Islam

**Week Six:** Youth unemployment and the 2011-20 Arab uprisings

**Week Seven:** the impact of third- or external parties

**Week Eight:** reprise and looking ahead
Initial readings and figures

Arab exceptionalism graph

World democracy graph

Patel, David S. “The Great Thaw in Arab Domestic Politics”, *Middle East Brief*, n. 140, Crown Center, Brandeis University, February, 2021


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**LEADER:** John Waterbury has been a student of Middle East politics since 1958, with long periods of residence in Morocco, Egypt, and Lebanon; he has taught at Princeton University and was president of the American University of Beirut, 1998-2008.

**MONDAYS:** 1:00 to 3:00 p.m., 8 weeks beginning September 27 through November 15

**MAXIMUM:** 60