POLICY REPORT
OCTOBER 2025

The Trust Differential Framework

BY DANIA ARAYSSI AND HENRY ROGERS

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Cover Image: Thousands gather behind the Sumud Convoy in Gabes, Tunisia, an international humanitarian mission departing on June 9, 2025, to deliver aid and challenge the ongoing Israeli blockade on Gaza. (Hasan Mrad / UCG / Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The fact that the Arab Spring took U.S. policymakers by surprise shows that relying on the strength of civil society and electoral processes to assess the quality of the government and promote democracy fails to predict political outcomes or inform effective policy interventions. Instead, a more reliable approach to U.S. policymaking, based on the idea of political trust, is the trust differential framework. In weak democratic states, empirical data shows that high trust in civil society with a simultaneous low trust in government institutions creates conditions for uprisings rather than regime stability. The new framework, measuring trust disaggregated across different institutions, including civil society, judiciary, police, and government agencies, can be used to forecast how political trust can lead to regime instability, democratic consolidation, or democratic backsliding. Only by understanding these differentiated trust patterns can the U.S. promote democracy more effectively than simply relying on reactive responses to develop predictive capabilities and strategic intervention tools.

Research Questions and Methodology Overview

Why do traditional democratization frameworks, including assessing the strength of civil society, fail to predict revolutionary outcomes in fragile states? What signaling frameworks can policymakers use to assess the state of a country's democracy and determine needed policy interventions? An analysis of trust in various political institutions, both governmental and nongovernmental, during 2010-2011 and 2023-2024 provides some clarity. In addition, an examination of variations in trust among these institutions shows how different political outcomes, including voting behavior and protest, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt, can be shaped.

These findings are based on the Arab Barometer Survey data collected in 2010-2011 and confirmed by 2023-2024 data. A mixed-methods analysis combining quantitative analysis of cross-national survey data with in-depth case studies of Egypt, Tunisia, and Lebanon concludes actionable policy frameworks for U.S. democracy promotion.

Key Policy Recommendations

1

MOVE BEYOND ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL APPROACHES

To promote democracy, solutions should be context-specific based on detailed institutional trust profiles that account for mistrust in the public confidence levels.

2

ESTABLISH TRUST MONITORING SYSTEMS

Analyze institutional legitimacy patterns to create comprehensive trust profiling systems for countries that can provide early warning indicators of regime change, instability, or democratization opportunities.

3

DESIGN DEMOCRACY POLICY BASED ON TRUST PROFILES

Policies that promote democracy should use governmental and nongovernmental trust profiles to identify effective recipients and reduce corruption risks while increasing policy impacts.

4

SHIFT THE OPERATIONAL MODEL

U.S. democracy promotion policy should transition from a reactive model to a predictive one using political trust to identify and address mistrust that can trigger political uprising or democratic backsliding.

POLITICAL TRUST

A concept in political science measuring the trust and confidence individuals, including citizens, have in their government and its different functioning institutions. more effectively than simply relying on reactive responses to develop predictive capabilities and strategic intervention tools.

Introduction

Why Current Frameworks Failed to Predict the Arab Spring

Policymakers in Washington have long relied on three factors to develop an assessment of a government's political system, including its democratic health: the activity and operations of civil society organizations, the presence of elections, and the extent to which an economy is free or liberated. For years, assessments of countries such as Tunisia and Egypt showed they had active and vibrant civil society organizations, regular election, and had undergone market reforms. These traditional metrics indicated these countries were on their way toward democracy. Tunisia was considered politically stable with an educated and robust middle class. Both Freedom House and USAID emphasized the health of civil society as an important indicator of regime assessment. The key flaw with this approach was considering civil society strength solely as a stabilizing element without assessing how the political context in which these organizations exist influence government stability.

The Arab Spring showed that Washington's decades-old model of democracy promotion in the Middle East and North Africa region was failing to build sustainable democracies. In countries with active civil societies, an indicator that Washington policymakers used to assess democracy in a regime, experienced revolutions and political breakdowns rather than regime stability.

At the same time, political trust in many government institutions raises an alarming signal about the relationship between citizens and their institutions and how such a relationship affects regime stability. Falling trust in government institutions, such as the police and military, correlates with rising protests and lower voting turnout, whereas increased trust in civil society correlates with higher voting and protest rates. Higher voter turnout reflects a functioning and stable democracy while high protest mobilization crosses a threshold of instability and reflects the instability of a government.

Core Policy Argument

The traditional theory of democracy promotion posits that a strong and active civil society plus electoral processes signal a functioning political system.[1] This does not, however, take into consideration the concept of political trust and how it operates across governmental and nongovernmental institutions. The key argument here is that political outcomes, including regime instability, revolution, or democratic backsliding are not only the result of political trust in one institution, but instead are based on variations in political trust across both governmental and nongovernmental institutions. When individuals trust civil society organizations but distrust government institutions, including police, military, and judiciary, the probability of protest and regime instability increases because civil society is perceived as the channel to express their discontent. Variations in political trust across political institutions can function as a predictive indicator of political instability in fragile countries such as Tunisia and Egypt. The process of understanding these variations in political trust allows for a more accurate assessment of the status of the government. This can determine how and where the U.S. needs to allocate funds to promote democracy in a way that will actually boost the country's legitimacy in the long term.

1 Michael A. Weber, Democracy and Human Rights in U.S. Foreign Policy: Evolution, Tools, and Considerations for Congress (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, January 7, 2025), https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R47890.

Theoretical Framework

Foundations of the U.S. Democracy Promotion Policy

The foundation of U.S. democracy promotion policy rests on key elements derived from Alexis de Tocqueville's and Robert Putnam's research in the 19th and 20th centuries, respectively, on social capital. Both Putnam's and Tocqueville's analyses have long influenced the U.S. strategies in democracy promotion, based on their ideas that civil society organizations strengthen democracy by building social capital and creating opportunities for citizens in different groups and identities to connect.

However, such a framework, which assumes that civil society engagement strengthens democracy, misses the important role of political trust. It thus fails to account for how political context shapes whether and under what conditions associational life supports or challenges existing institutional arrangements. The framework treats civil society as an inherently stabilizing force without considering how political trust determines whether civic engagement channels system stability or system change. This investment pattern by U.S. policymakers also reflected a profound misunderstanding of how civil society operates in hybrid regimes.

In Freedom House's rankings of countries based on civil liberties and political rights, the number of civil society groups and active associations and whether elections occur inform where a country ranks.[2] The logic seems obvious: Vibrant civic life along with elections should indicate a healthy democracy. So, when policymakers see democratic problems, their go-to solution has been to pump money into civil society organizations, assuming this will naturally strengthen democratic institutions. But the Arab Spring shattered this neat formula. Tunisia and Egypt had exactly the kind of robust civil society that democracy experts celebrated, including professional associations, advocacy networks, and active nongovernmental organizations. Yet these groups fueled revolutionary movements that led to a short-term democracy in Egypt and Tunisia. Tunisia started to experience democratic backsliding within a decade, while Egypt's democracy lasted less than a year before reverting to military autocracy.[3]

In countries where people trust civil society but distrust government institutions, the investment in strong civic organizations without similar investment in other institutions can actually destabilize rather than strengthen political systems in the long term. The relationship depends entirely on context, specifically whether people trust their government or see it as corrupt. Strong civil society in the context of a weak and corrupt government creates conditions for an uprising that might lead to a short-term change in leadership rather than to a sustainable system of governance. This is because citizens in that situation refer to civil society organizations to express dissatisfaction with how the government is functioning through contentious political action since voting is considered an ineffective way to express such dissatisfaction given the country's corruption. This means the current method of democracy promotion needs to be reconsidered. Instead of strengthening civil society and hoping for democracy to work, a more effective framework would invest not only in civil society but also in institutions that lack public trust.

The Trust Differential Framework

This policy report tests the hypothesis that regime outcomes depend not on overall levels of institutional trust, but on the specific patterns of trust

2 Freedom House. "Freedom in the World Research Methodology." Freedom House. Accessed October 2, 2025. https://freedomhouse.org/reports/freedom-world/freedom-world-research-methodology.

3 Michaël Béchir Ayari, "Tunisia," International Crisis Group, August 2025, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia.

“Countries exhibiting trust in civil society alongside weak governmental legitimacy require different strategies than those with more balanced institutional confidence levels.”

distribution across governmental versus nongovernmental institutions. This approach reveals whether trust differentials serve as predictive indicators of regime change versus stability. Our findings highlight that higher trust in government and police is linked to lower protest probabilities, reflecting how confidence in state authority discourages contentious action, while trust in civil society organizations can encourage both contentious political activity and voting. This issue is particularly important for U.S. democracy promotion projects and initiatives.

The incorrect interpretation of institutional trust patterns as an indicator of government stability can lead to failure in predicting the rise in revolutions and governmental instability in these countries. The resulting political transition and rise in political violence can jeopardize U.S. interests. Implementing a trust differential framework could help U.S. policymakers establish a sustainable democracy, ensuring its successful promotion, and reducing the chances of democratic backsliding. Assessing how political trust varies across institutions, both governmental and nongovernmental, and unpacking the factors behind such variations, U.S. policymakers will be able to focus investments in a way that avoids contentious political actions and encourages voting is how citizens can hold their government and its institutions accountable.

Political Trust Operates Differently Across Institutional Spheres

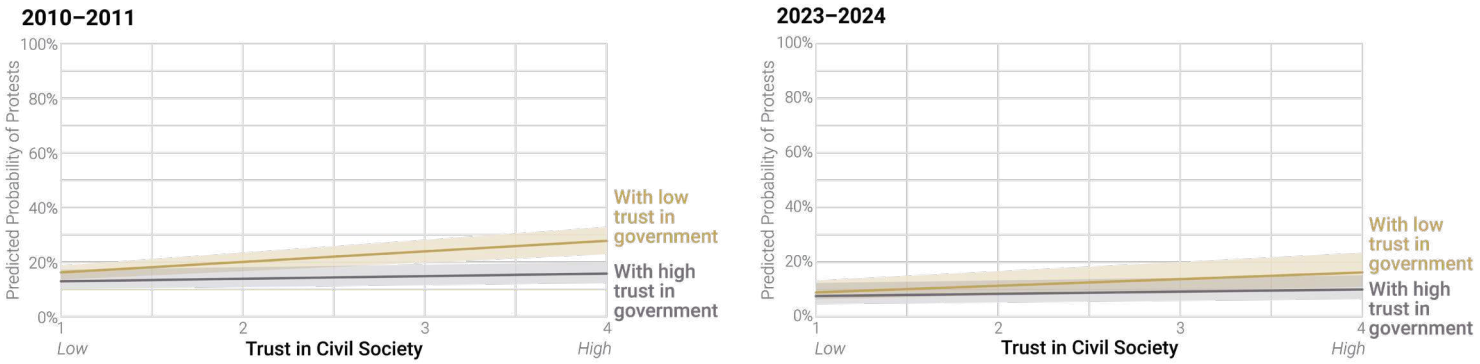
Citizens evaluate individual institutions based on fundamentally different criteria, creating distinct spheres of trust that operate independently of each other. This differentiation has profound implications for how democracy promotion strategies should be designed and implemented. Government institutions face performance-based evaluations rooted in service delivery and rule of law. Citizens ask practical questions: Does the judicial system provide fair hearings? Can bureaucratic processes be completed without corruption? Do security forces protect citizens or prey on them? When state institutions consistently fail these basic governance tests, public confidence erodes rapidly and comprehensively. Nongovernmental institutions such as labor unions, religious organizations, and advocacy groups build trust by demonstrating independence from state control and authentic representation of constituent interests. These institutions succeed not by governing effectively, but by authentically advancing their members’ interests against external pressures.

This distinction creates a critical dynamic that traditional approaches to promoting democracy overlook: Citizens can simultaneously maintain high confidence in civil society while expressing deep skepticism toward governmental institutions. Rather than representing contradictory attitudes, this pattern reflects rational citizen responses to divergent institutional performance and accountability structures. For policymakers, this recognition fundamentally reframes how policymakers should assess democratic health and design policy interventions. Countries exhibiting trust in civil society alongside weak governmental legitimacy require different strategies than those with more balanced institutional confidence levels. Understanding these trust differentials enables more precise targeting of democracy promotion resources and more accurate predictions regarding political stability outcomes.

Probability of Protest

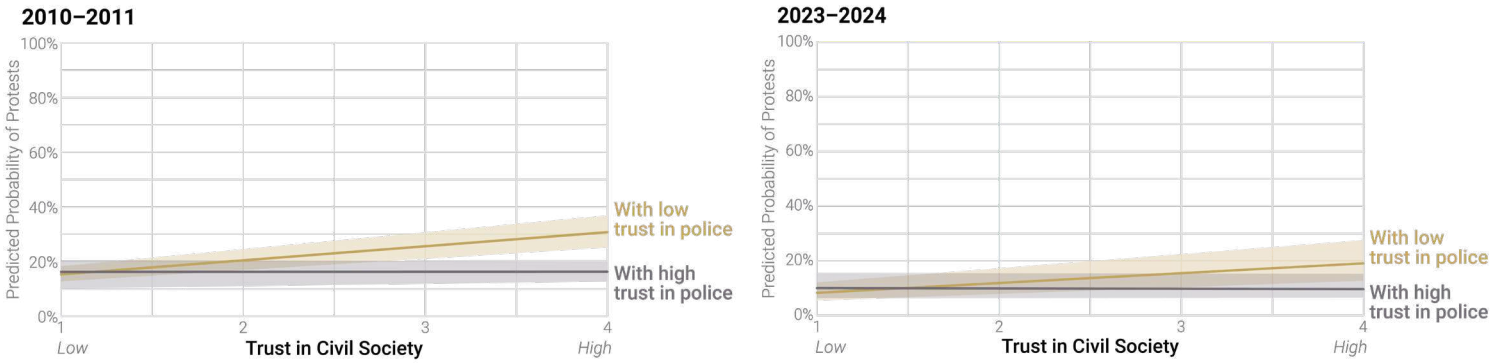
The relationship between trust in civil society and protest participation depends on trust in the government — protest likelihood rises most among those who trust civil society but distrust the government.

Trust in Civil Society Versus Trust in Government



The relationship between trust in civil society and protest participation also depends on trust in the police — protest likelihood rises most among those who trust civil society but distrust the police.

Trust in Civil Society Versus Trust in Police



Source: Authors" analysis using Arab Barometer data from 2010-2011 and 2023-2024

Political Trust Patterns and Their Implications

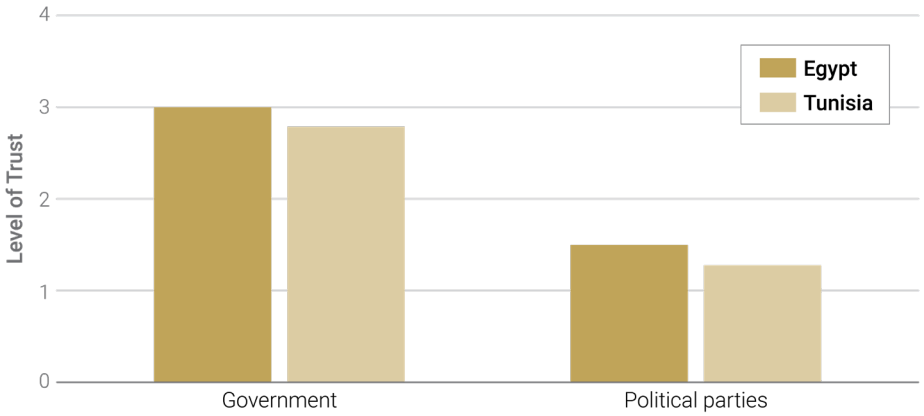
Scenario 1: High civil society trust + Low government trust = Protests

When individuals trust civil society at a higher rate and distrust their government because they perceive it as illegitimate, they might feel empowered to actively engage and express their discontent by relying on strong civic networks. Such combinations encourage individual solidarity and increase organizational capacity, which can make protest more likely than formal politics. The result is that individuals express their grievances through contentious political action rather than voting.

Scenario 2: Low internal security apparatus trust + High civil society trust = Protest

Low trust in a government's internal security apparatus is an indicator of protest mobilization. Whether in Minnesota or Cairo, low public trust in law enforcement institutions trends toward protest. However, when mixed with high public trust in civil society, this trend becomes a reliable forecast. The likelihood of protest mobilization is increased when a society has low trust in law enforcement and high trust in civil society. Civil society acts as a catalyst. Its alternate power structure and community often encourage and support mobilization, organization, and protection for protests. In dictatorships in which the regime uses law enforcement as a tool of authoritarian control, these trend lines are exacerbated, as the clear line from the oppressor to the regime can be drawn. The trust combination in this style of governance is conducive to instability and should be monitored with other cross-institutional trust levels.

Trust in Government Versus Political Parties in Egypt and Tunisia



Source: Authors" analysis using Arab Barometer data from (2010-2011 and 2023-2024), computing average trust scores (1-4 scale) for Egypt and Tunisia.

Medium or High Government Trust + Low Political Party Trust = Disconnection from Government

The data from both Tunisia and Egypt shows a medium-to-high trust of the central government. Analysts monitoring Tunisia from afar traditionally take this as a sign of stability. Trust in the government makes protest, instability, or regime change less likely. However, it is important to analyze the underlying trust profile. While people in these countries indicate high government trust, they show almost no trust in their political parties. Polling results that show high trust in government in an authoritarian regime could be due to coercion, fear, or reliance on the system itself. Low trust in political parties reflects a disconnect from the government. That result in a democracy reflects the attitude of being not properly represented, engendering feelings of disenfranchisement from the political system, a possible indicator of impending protests and destabilization. Analyzing political party support and comparing the results generates a more complete picture from which more accurate predictions can be made.

Trust patterns before and after the Arab Spring reveal why traditional investments in democracy promotion in the form of governmental capacity-building failed to stabilize Tunisia's democracy. After 13 years and billions of dollars in international democracy assistance, trust in government institutions remains barely above the prerevolution baseline. The data suggests that effective democracy promotion must account for these entrenched trust differentials rather than assuming that institutional strengthening alone will generate public confidence.

Civil Society Engagement and Revolutionary Outcomes

Before the 2011 uprising, countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria had positive democratic indicators, including the number of civil societies and the existence of elections, yet these indicators failed to predict the rise of protests there.[4] For example, in Tunisia, a large number of civil society organizations existed, including women's rights groups and labor unions. In Egypt, civil society organizations, including religious and charitable institutions, were well-established and diverse. In Syria, prior to the fall of the regime of Bashar al-Assad, the government had sustained well-functioning civic organizations, including an active chamber of commerce. Rather than these civil society organizations functioning as a stabilizing force, they contributed to uprisings against the government and following the fall of these regimes they were unable to build a sustainable democracy.

4 Michael Gordon, "Forecasting Instability: The Case of the Arab Spring and the Limitations of Socioeconomic Data," Wilson Center, February 8, 2018, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/person/michael-gordon-0.

Failure of Traditional Democratization Indicators

Traditional democracy promotion relies on a set of indicators that suggested a positive democratic trajectory in the countries of the Arab Spring. These indicators include:

Term	Description
Civil Society	Policymakers perceived the existence of a large number of civil society organizations, including professional associations and advocacy networks, as evidence that a state's democracy is healthy and sustainable. However, the literature covering comparative political behavior and political institutions and case studies in the Middle East suggest that the mere existence of these institutions is insufficient to assess the extent to which a government is democratic or not, or whether the political regime is stable.
Electoral Competition	The existence of electoral processes in Egypt and Tunisia was perceived as a gradual step toward democratization rather than a mechanism the government used to legitimize its rule.
Economic Liberalization	Market reform policies, including the growth and development of the private sector, were seen as complementary to political liberalization. These indicators not only failed to accurately predict outcomes, but they also actively misled practitioners of democracy promotion into viewing these countries as success stories in the gradual democratization process. The existing framework in democracy promotion used by the United States does not differentiate between civil society that reinforces existing political arrangements and civil society that challenges regime legitimacy, and most importantly how investments in democratization can build sustainable long-term democracies rather than just uprisings against a dictator.
Resource Allocation Challenges in Democracy Promotion	U.S. democracy promotion has historically been plagued by resource allocation challenges. This includes not funding valuable projects, but instead lining the pockets of destabilizing forces such as malign actors, funding an already vibrant tourism sector, or writing inaccurate and redundant textbooks.[5] It is essential that policymakers pivot away from the pattern of unsustainable and incapable recipients. In some cases, policymakers who do not possess a deep understanding of a country's culture and people can be tasked with creating policy for those places. This can create a gap between the theory and the results, as a lack of knowledge facilitates pitfalls and shortcomings. This gap makes tools, including trust differential frameworks, essential for managing risk.

The U.S. has not considered public trust as a criterion for major foreign policy decisions in the past, a factor that could explain the challenges and missed opportunities of democracy promotion projects. These include U.S. support for unpopular presidents in South Vietnam and mismanaging a post-Saddam Iraq. The insufficient analysis of public perceptions in both those examples hampered U.S. foreign policy efforts.[6] In both cases basing policy on trust measures would have strengthened the U.S. position. In Vietnam, signaling an unproductive partnership with a dysfunctional state, and in Iraq by providing policymakers with a deeper understanding of Iraq's unique reconstruction challenges.

5 Sen. Rand Paul, "Festivus Report 2024," Homeland Security and Government Affairs, 2024, https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/FESTIVUS-REPORT-2024.pdf.
"U.S. Military Assistance to Egypt: Separating Fact from Fiction," Middle East Democracy Center, accessed September 25, 2025, https://mideastdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Egypt-FMF-2.pdf.

6 Charles Trueheart, "A Messiah without a Message," Miller Center, February 27, 2024, https://millercenter.org/diplomats-war/messiah-without-message.
"Iraqi Insider Details U.S. Mismanagement after Fall of Saddam," The New York Times, April 9, 2007, https://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/09/world/africa/09iht-insider.4.5202860.html.

The Need for Risk Management in Fragile State Interventions

The states in which the U.S. intervenes are often fragile and run by governments experiencing challenges such as corruption, complicating U.S. democracy promotion and increasing the risks of waste and inefficiency. To mitigate this, interventions in fragile states require that risks associated with different actors be considered and managed. Well-trusted organizations and individuals often pose fewer risks to intervention efforts than government institutions that tend to be less trusted by the public.[7] While U.S. policymakers and experts are familiar with institutions in countries targeted for intervention, they are rarely on the ground to observe the outputs from and the corruption within recipient institutions. Hence, the public in these countries have a better understanding of corruption patterns in these institutions than U.S. policymakers. Putting that knowledge to use can help the U.S. avoid ineffective distributors of aid. Learning from logic, and utilizing organizations trusted by the public, can create effective, risk-averse interventions in fragile states.

Case Studies

Egypt

Egypt, prior to the Arab Spring, possessed a restricted civil society with many traditionally independent institutions under government control. The Muslim Brotherhood, on the other hand, remained independent partially because of its fluctuating legal status over the previous decades. After mass protests resulted in the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak, the Muslim Brotherhood remained one of the only independent institutions that had gained public trust. This was a result of its political exclusion and its long history of service to people who the government had failed. However, during Egypt's transition from autocracy to young democracy, this lack of diversified trust across political institutions proved a weakness of the Muslim Brotherhood, and despite its leader winning the presidency, the military establishment quickly engulfed it, co-opting the revolution and seizing power. Egypt in 2011-2012, which possessed a dominant military and regime-integrated civil society, highlights the role of security and religious organizations in regime change. These results further signal that when studying democratization, regime change, and democratic backsliding, it is necessary to study all political institutions beyond just civil society. The inability for Egypt to break out of its cyclical pattern of revolution-to-military autocracy shows the alternate path to an effective civil society-shaped transition. With regard to public trust and religious organizations, the roles of the Muslim Brotherhood during the Egyptian Arab Spring, contrasted with the role of the Ennahda Movement in Tunisia, shapes this report's view of religious organizations in democratization and political transitions. A perspective that religious organizations are strong protest mobilizers that possess the ability to support stability and democracy promotion when aligned with cross institution political trust. However, like political organizations, religious ones are also unable to support democracy on their own and are stronger in collaboration as illustrated by Egypt's democratic collapse.

Lebanon

Lebanon in 2019 represents another pathway of institutional trust dynamics: Sustained reform mobilization without regime change. Unlike Tunisia's revolutionary transition to democracy or Egypt's cycle from revolution to military restoration, Lebanon's 2019 protests demonstrate how economic collapse and government corruption caused trust in state institutions to

7 Patricia Justino and Melissa Samarin, "Trust in a Changing World: Social Cohesion and the Social Contract," The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, December 2024, https://social.desa.un.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/World%20Social%20Report_Dec2024.pdf.

plummet while trust in sectarian organizations and civil society groups, while fragmented, remained relatively high. This combination led to the rise of political mobilization. Lebanon's case reveals how institutionalized social fragmentation can simultaneously enable cross-sectarian protest coordination while preventing the unified opposition necessary for regime change, offering critical insights for U.S. policymakers seeking to distinguish between reform movements and revolutionary threats. Specifically, Lebanon's confessional system creates competing trust networks where citizens trust their own sectarian institutions while distrusting cross-sectarian state institutions, preventing unified opposition capable of regime change. The U.S. focused primarily on military aid and measures opposing Hezbollah while missing opportunities to support the few cross-sectarian civil society organizations that gained trust during the protests, failing to leverage the moment when the Lebanese public briefly united against government corruption

Tunisia

Prior to the Arab Spring, Tunisian civil society was independent of the state and had varying levels of public trust across organizations. Those groups played various roles in revolution and transition. This trust was stratified across multiple major political institutions that led the country through its precarious transition process. While public trust in political parties, the institution of the judiciary, and law enforcement was low, the country's mixed trust profile of a few well-trusted civil society organizations and individuals in the judiciary, combined with support of a previously ostracized military, put the country on the course toward democracy.

Tunisia from 2011 to 2015 represents the importance of a robust civil society in effective democratization, and it possesses a unique relationship with the Arab Spring. The regional movement originated in Tunisia, whose revolution led to a democratic transition. However, over the past five years, the country has experienced a democratic backslide under President Kais Saied. His government has systematically worked to undermine civil society and the people's trust in it, underscoring its value as a check on authoritarianism and its place in effective democratization. Despite Tunisia's history of having a strong civil society, autocracy is once again on the rise. In 2021, Saied suspended the parliament and ruled by decree.[8] Saied understands the power of civil society and its ability to promote democracy. Before he became president, he was the head of the Tunisian Association of Constitutional Law. Under Saied, the government has raided offices of civil society groups, arrested their members, and presided over a society-wide crackdown. Concurrently, the Tunisian General Labour Union, Tunisia's largest civil society organization, has been slowed by infighting, negatively affecting its ability to oppose these government actions.[9] This democratic erosion is a symptom of Tunisia's greatest democratic bulwark being washed away.

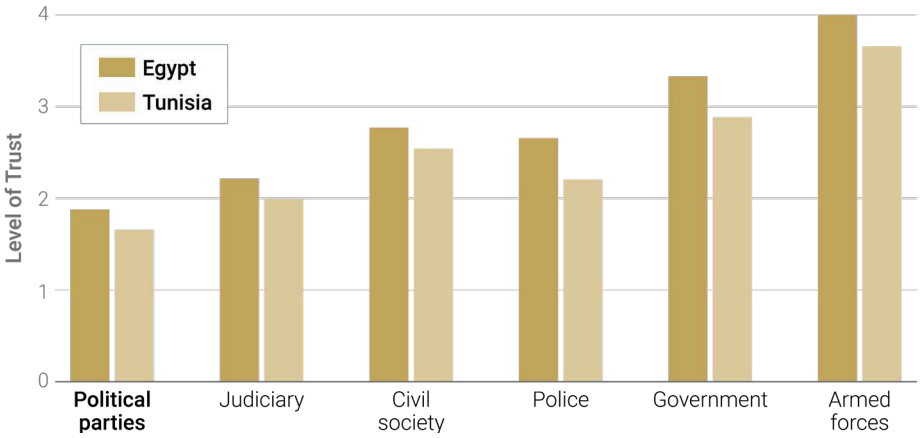
The Role of the Military in Tunisia and Egypt

In 2011, the Tunisian and Egyptian militaries possessed the highest political trust among citizens of their countries relative to other institutions. They both experienced profound impacts on their countries' democratic transitions, with significantly different results. They underscore how a military's place in a society and the reasons for trust can help predict its role in the revolution and transition, therefore contributing to the forecast of a country's regime change outlook.

8 William McCants Shadi Hamid et al., "Kais Saied's Power Grab in Tunisia," Brookings, March 9, 2022, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/kais-saieds-power-grab-in-tunisia/.

9 Majdi Ouerfelli, "Tunisia: UGTT Threatened in Its Very Existence," Nawaat, February 11, 2025, https://nawaat.org/2025/02/11/tunisia-ugtt-threatened-in-its-very-existence/.

Trust in Political Parties Compared to Other Political Institutions in Egypt and Tunisia



Source: Authors" analysis using Arab Barometer data from 2010-2011.

Before his ouster in 2011, then-President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali had sidelined and ostracized the military over concerns of a coup. Subsequently, it was highly trusted by the public for its distance from the regime as well as its professionalism. These qualities allowed it to act as a stabilizing force during the revolution and again during the transition process, reinforcing the will of the people, civil society, and judiciary.

The Egyptian armed forces possessed a vastly different role in society, one of deep integration. That resulted in strong political trust that placed value on its actions and political leadership. When the Muslim Brotherhood came to power under Mohammed Morsi, its political trust began to wane. In a country where trust was minimal across most institutional sectors, aside from the military, it was not a surprise that the people supported the military's inevitable coup.

Democratic Backsliding In Tunisia

Ineffective allocation of support by the United States was a major reason Saied was able to relegate Tunisian civil society. The U.S. had been involved in Tunisian state-building since the fall of Ben Ali, a time when the fledgling democracy needed support. The U.S. government provided the new government with $100 million at the outset, poured tens of millions more into its military every year, and allocated less than $10 million a year to civil society and other organizations. But support for civil society was soon diverted into counterterrorism efforts and the Tunisian economy. Like civil society, the judiciary received little funding while political parties and law enforcement were given donated equipment to fight terrorism, and little else.

The traditional theory of supporting democracy has been to promote a middle class, diversify the economy, monitor elections, teach civics, and maintain security. This approach has repeatedly left the role of public trust out and has fallen short, which is what happened in Tunisia. This omission has fueled a disconnect between the theory and its results. Two theories attempt to explain this disconnect, and each highlights the value of political trust.

The first theory posits that in the midst of the war on terrorism, the U.S. allocated a large percentage of its funding for Tunisia to the military, strengthening it, but also altering its place in society.[10] Strengthening this theory is the amount of U.S. military aid to Egypt, which starkly contrasted with U.S. developmental aid, helping entrench the power of the Egyptian armed forces.[11] In 2021 alone, of the $1.4 billion in U.S. aid to Egypt, $1.3 billion was dedicated to its military, with about $125 million allocated for general

10 "Fa.Gov," FA.gov, accessed September 25, 2025, https://foreignassistance.gov/cd/tunisia/2020/disbursements/0.

11 Haya Abdelmeguid, "Foreign Aid to Egypt: A Domestic and International Vicious Cycle?," Centre Étudiant pour la Recherche Stratégique, April 21, 2025, https://crssciencespo.com/levant/foreign-aid-to-egypt-a-domestic-and-international-vicious-cycle#:~:text=Conclusion,to%20the%20broader%20Egyptian%20population.

economic support.[12] This balance strengthened one of the military's most important assets, its entrenchment in the Egyptian economy. U.S. military support strengthened the military's position while pushing democratization further away. While the Tunisian and Egyptian militaries both have high public trust numbers, it's important to analyze why that's the case and what that trust means for a country. For policymakers, it is not enough to merely observe that an actor is well-trusted. Understanding the variations of trust across several political institutions and what that trust signifies must also be considered.

The second theory proposes that the traditional model of democracy promotion places high value on strengthening specific institutions instead of supporting the broad spectrum of political institutions that lack trust. This would explain why the U.S. invested in Tunisian economic development and defense institutions while allocating a relatively small portion of its aid to its civil society. These are not irrelevant allocations of resources. However, the use of political trust measures and funding a vast range of political institutions that have low trust would be more useful in reinforcing democracy. Also, a U.S. style of democracy might not be amenable to the local population. Therefore, it's important to understand how investing in a particular institution will be most effectively received by the population. It is essential that policymakers reach out to trusted partners with local knowledge to tailor stabilizing or democratizing policies to a particular country or region instead of using a one-size-fits-all approach.

These case studies highlight the nuances of trust stratification and the importance of establishing meaningful trust profiles. Understanding the actors and the reasons behind their levels of trust is paramount. A deep and nuanced profile of judicial trust is important for understanding the stability and future of a country. Low trust in the courts, for instance, can help mobilize the opposition and lead to destabilization. That's why understanding public trust in the judicial system and its individual actors can forecast the role of the judiciary in a transition process, because it signals the likelihood of a stabilizing force. An understanding of an institution's place in society and how it can wield its trust within the limits placed upon it is important to build an effective model for supporting democracy. Without a nuanced perspective on the different kinds and ways that trust is exhibited across institutions, a predictive model will not be fully accurate.

Policy Consequences Based on Traditional Models of Democracy Promotion

Misallocation of Funds

The U.S. has consistently misallocated funds used to support its foreign policy aims. Through an effective utilization and understanding of the role trust plays in democratic development, these funds could have a stronger impact on stability and democratization efforts. This is not a critique of giving funds to the wrong people, but of waste or inefficiency. In 2009, the inspector general for Iraq testified before Congress that 15% to 20% of the development funds allocated by Congress was wasted or stolen.[13] In Egypt, weapons systems provided by the U.S. are redundant and unnecessary for its current security challenges.[14] In Egypt, an oversupply of U.S.-provided M1 Abrams tanks has

12 Haya Abdelmeguid, "Foreign Aid to Egypt: A Domestic and International Vicious Cycle?," Centre Étudiant pour la Recherche Stratégique, April 21, 2025, https://crssciencespo.com/levant/foreign-aid-to-egypt-a-domestic-and-international-vicious-cycle#:~:text=Conclusion,to%20the%20broader%20Egyptian%20population.

13 "U.S. Watchdog Says Billions of U.S. Aid Wasted in Iraq," Reuters, accessed September 25, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSN2544653120090325.

14 Julia Simon, "Egypt May Not Need Fighter Jets, but U.S. Keeps Sending Them Anyway," NPR, August 8, 2013, https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2013/08/08/209878158/egypt-may-not-need-fighter-jets-but-u-s-keeps-sending-them-anyway.

resulted in a surplus of unused weapons in warehouses.[15] By increasing the efficiency of how these funds were used, U.S. development aid could have been more impactful. The tradeoff of spending resources to minimize inefficiencies such as these makes fiscal sense, especially considering the rate at which funds have been misallocated.[16] To minimize these losses effectively, it is important that policymakers utilize trust alongside results in policy evaluations. Measuring public trust is an indicator of the effective distribution of these resources as uses for illicit trade, corruption, etc., will lower public trust in the institution.

Strategic Surprise in Revolutionary Contexts

The United States was surprised by the Arab Spring. Because it was not prepared for such a development, it responded ineffectively.[17] Policymakers focused on the elite, working to maintain the status quo in order to achieve short term goals. They did not analyze the trust U.S. partners possessed and were unable to correctly interpret the trends presenting themselves. As a result, countries such as Egypt and Tunisia that were epicenters of the Arab Spring have suffered democratic regression, and U.S. influence in the region has declined. To avoid a repeat of these shortcomings, the U.S. foreign policy establishment should compile country profiles of public trust across institutions and organizations, allowing them to more accurately calculate the potential for regime change and formulate prepared responses. This would not only benefit the U.S., but also the targeted countries, too.

Promoting Proactive Policy Responses

It is essential that the U.S. take a proactive stance regarding democracy promotion. When stability is not supported, instability emerges. If stability is not fostered, it can be lost, and the U.S. taxpayer pays the price.[18] The consistent allocation of resources to support stability in the short term could prevent burdensome future crises. This could not only provide U.S. foreign policy with a superior position, but it also could reduce overall total spending. A passive foreign policy stance in an increasingly connected world is ineffective. Through consistent, proactive maintenance and support of stability the U.S. can place itself and its taxpayers in a more positive position.

New Policy Framework for Democracy Promotion

Fragmented Trust Patterns in Hybrid Regimes

Hybrid regimes present citizens with contradictory institutional landscapes that demand sophisticated navigation strategies.[19] These political systems simultaneously offer democratic mechanisms, such as elections, constitutional protections, and civil society space, while maintaining authoritarian practices, including systemic corruption, surveillance, and arbitrary enforcement. This duality creates what policymakers must recognize as fragmented legitimacy structures.

15 "U.S. Military Assistance to Egypt: Separating Fact from Fiction," Middle East Democracy Center, accessed September 25, 2025, https://mideastdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Egypt-FMF-2.pdf.

16 Andrei Shleifer, "Peter Bauer and the Failure of Foreign Aid," Cato Journal 29, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 379–390, https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/serials/files/cato-journal/2010/11/cj29n3-1.pdf.

17 Paul B. Stares, "Enhancing U.S. Crisis Preparedness," Council on Foreign Relations, June 21, 2011, https://www.cfr.org/report/enhancing-us-crisis-preparedness.

18 U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Comptroller, "Estimated Cost to Each U.S. Taxpayer of Each of the Wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria," May 2023, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/documents/Section1090Reports/Estimated_Cost_to_Each_U.S._Taxpayer_of_Each_of_the_Wars_in_Afghanistan,_Iraq_and_Syria_dated_May_2023.pdf.

19 Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

“Instead of reacting to crises after they occur, trust patterns that signal coming instability can be identified, and engagement can be proactively designed to shape how that instability unfolds.”

Citizens develop pragmatic approaches to institutional engagement based on learned effectiveness rather than formal authority. [20] They participate in electoral processes while harboring realistic expectations about outcomes. They invest energy in professional associations and advocacy organizations that demonstrate actual influence while maintaining distance from political parties that lack meaningful power. Citizens rationally expect civil society organizations to advocate effectively for their interests while anticipating that interactions with government agencies will involve extractive practices.[21]

This institutional fragmentation creates inherent political vulnerabilities that democracy promotion practitioners must understand. During periods of crisis or heightened political tension, citizens default to institutions they perceive as legitimate and effective rather than those with formal authority. The Arab Spring demonstrated this pattern clearly. Trusted civil society organizations became focal points for political mobilization because they possessed the public confidence that governmental institutions lacked. For policymakers, recognizing fragmented trust patterns is essential for both assessment and intervention design. These dynamics indicate a rational adaptation to contradictory institutional environments. Understanding how citizens navigate these split realities enables democracy promoters to strategize and promote solutions that work with, not against, existing trust patterns.

Strategic Leverage Opportunities from Trust Differentials

Understanding these trust patterns opens new strategic possibilities for democracy promotion. First, trust differentials can indicate where investments will work. Pumping money into untrusted government institutions results in losses due to corruption, or funds being rejected by citizens who see these institutions as illegitimate. But supporting institutions that have public trust can multiply the impact of aid, as these organizations can effectively mobilize people and create change. Second, trust patterns provide an early warning about where instability might emerge. Gaps between trust in civil society and trust in government can indicate volatility. Countries with high civil society trust and low government trust are primed for protest mobilization. While this could lead to democratic reform, it requires a different nuanced approach than countries with more balanced trust patterns as the probability destabilization is higher. Third, trust differentials reveal opportunities for institutional bridging. In other words, instead of just strengthening civil society or just reforming government, they allow policymakers to support efforts to build connections between trusted nongovernmental actors and legitimate governmental reformers. The goal isn’t to co-opt civil society, but to create pathways for trusted organizations to influence policy through democratic channels rather than street protests.

The key insight is that trust patterns are predictive. They do not just reflect current conditions but can indicate future possibilities. A country where people trust their government roughly as much as they trust civil society is likely to channel political energy through existing institutions. A country where trust is highly asymmetric is likely to see that energy channeled into challenges to existing arrangements. This approach would give democracy promotion a strategic advantage it has never had: The ability to anticipate political dynamics and design interventions accordingly. Instead of reacting to crises after they occur, trust patterns that signal coming instability can be identified, and engagement can be proactively designed to shape how that instability unfolds.

20 Levi, Margaret, and Audrey Sacks. “Legitimating Beliefs: Sources and Indicators.” Regulation & Governance 3, no. 4 (2009): 311–333. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-5991.2009.01066.x

21 Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Strategic Applications for U.S. Policy

Since the early 19th century, the U.S. has invested in Middle Eastern stability, a region key to its economic interests.[22] While its imperatives have shifted over time, they have consistently revolved around economic and security interests. Instability in the Middle East has historically radiated outward to the detriment of those interests. In Egypt, for example, the Suez Canal, a major trade and commercial route, has remained the focus of U.S. foreign policy, both under Mubarak and today. Its imperative is thus preventing civil unrest that harms U.S. economic interests.

Early Warning System Development

Trust Differential Monitoring Protocols

U.S. policymakers should establish trust differential monitoring systems based on public opinion surveys conducted by institutions such as the Arab Barometer. These politically neutral surveys should include questions that measure political trust across different institutions, including the government, judiciary, police, military, and civil society in the context of fragile states. These systems would track trust across different institutions, both governmental and nongovernmental, with an emphasis on how the variation in trust signals potential government instability, democratic backsliding, or an uprising. The data should be assessed by local actors that examine both quantitative and contextual factors shaping trust patterns.

Threshold Indicators for Political Volatility

Research on the Arab Spring shows that the variation in trust between civil society and government can lead to contentious political action. Therefore, policymakers should build a specific portfolio on trust patterns for institutions in these specific countries that takes each country's contextual dynamics into account. Thresholds for evaluating trust levels should be adjusted regularly based on the country's performance over time.

Context-Specific Intervention Strategies

1 STRATEGIC APPROACH

Comprehensive Institutional Strengthening

A balanced trust profile indicates the potential for democratic consolidation. Tunisia from 2015-2020 reflects this with balanced trust among civil society, the judiciary, and the military. If U.S. support of this young democracy had been effectively spread out to support trust across the board, the current state of democratic backsliding would have been less likely to occur. Equal or semi-equal public trust in multiple institutions allows the institutions to keep one another in check and pushes the country in the direction of fair representation and democracy.

2 RESOURCE ALLOCATION

Equal Distribution across All Four Sectors

By balancing allocation of resources, the U.S. would be able to foster stability and prevent monopolies on trust, such as that of the Egyptian military from 2010-2012. The unbalanced allocation of U.S. funds to the Egyptian armed forces helps support its monopoly on the economy and its deeply ingrained place in society. Egypt's unbalanced trust profile reflects the consequences of not distributing funds equally.

3 CIVIL SOCIETY

As Mobilization Catalyst vs. Democratic Educator

Traditional democratization development has assumed that a strong civil society is a democratic educator across the board, thus countries with strong civil societies are democracy-bound. While there is some truth to this, it is

22 U.S. Department of State, "The Barbary Wars, 1801–1805 and 1815–1816," Office of the Historian, accessed October 2, 2025, https://history.state.gov/milestones/1801-1829/barbary-wars.

important for policymakers to take a more nuanced view of civil society. While it often pushes a country toward democracy, it can also become a mobilization catalyst. The data suggests that in certain trust profiles, it is more likely that civil society works to catalyze mobilization more than as a democratic educator. The strongest example of this is when law enforcement or an internal security apparatus engenders low trust while trust in civil society is high. Data from 2010-2011 and 2023-2024 show consistent trends toward protests and instability.

4 LAW ENFORCEMENT LEGITIMACY

Cornerstone of Stability

Measuring the legitimacy of law enforcement is a key part of a comprehensive trust profile. When using trust to bolster or foster democracy, it is important to manifest trust in internal security forces. Often, aid reaches these institutions in the form of equipment or training.[23] While this supports security objectives, and is important, reform that fosters trust in those institutions is equally important to reach stability goals. This can take the form of emphasizing the need for transparency, building community, fighting corruption, and minimizing institutional abuse. Across the Middle East, data consistently indicates that a low level of trust in security forces results in a higher probability of protest. While traditional forms of support to bolster these institutions are important, so is the need to push for reforms that manifest trust and support stability.

Conclusion

The Arab Spring revealed a fundamental flaw in current U.S. approaches to democracy promotion in many fragile states. Contrary to current thinking, a strong and active civil society does not necessarily guarantee political stability when citizens trust these institutions at a higher rate than they do their government. The trust differential framework offers a predictive tool that helps policymakers examine how variations in political trust across governmental and nongovernmental institutions signal political instability, regime change, or democratic backsliding. The case studies of Lebanon, Tunisia, and Egypt show different political outcomes shaped by variations in political trust. When political trust is high in military institutions, usually an authoritarian regime follows. When trust is fragmented across sectarian identities, such as the case of Lebanon, protest is likely to rise but fall short of necessary regime change. Where trust is balanced across multiple democratic institutions, successful transitions to democracy become possible. But continuous investment in these institutions is required to prevent backsliding into authoritarianism. The U.S. can no longer afford reactive democracy promotion that invests billions of dollars in unpredictable outcomes, the foreign policy establishment must adapt and refine its approach. By implementing trust monitoring systems, allocating resources based on legitimacy patterns, and designing context-specific interventions, U.S. policymakers can transform the current model of democracy promotion into a more efficient and impactful policy that responds to real challenges. The framework provides early warning capabilities that protect U.S. interests while supporting sustainable democratic development.

Policy Recommendations

MOVE BEYOND ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL APPROACHES

The democratization theory of the last few decades is rooted in effective ideas, but it has struggled to produce tangible results. By moving away from a one-size-fits-all strategy of promoting democratization and stabilization, the U.S. can spend slightly more resources that produce concrete results rather than becoming stuck in cycles of increasing demand for aid. The U.S. foreign

23 Foreign Assistance, "Tunisia," accessed October 2, 2025, https://www.foreignassistance.gov/cd/tunisia/.

policy establishment must recognize trust as a key signal of stability and look beyond the central government to the variety of political institutions that affect a government. Policymakers must accept the fact that democracy promotion is inherently complex and understand that public trust is a strong indicator of government stability and transition. However, they must not limit these analyses to the surface level, but instead develop accurate trust profiles that take a nuanced view of the drivers behind different levels of public trust.

ESTABLISH TRUST MONITORING SYSTEMS

The U.S. foreign policy establishment should build trust profiles on select countries' institutional trust dynamic that policymakers could use to monitor risks for regime change, instability, and uprisings, as well as the potential for democratization. Accuracy dictates that these profiles reflect a deeper understanding of the reasons behind the levels of trust, the nuances of the trust relationship, and how this is all affected by and affects an institution's place in political society.

DESIGN DEMOCRACY POLICY BASED ON TRUST PROFILES

To manage the assumed risk in democracy promotion, it is important that policymakers allocate resources to partners with high public trust. This would entail making and managing trust profiles of potential and current partners and recipients of U.S. support. These profiles would help pinpoint political institutions and groups that will promote stability and democracy in the most efficient manner. This method would help include local actors in a natural and functional manner, and not just focus on elites, a past obstacle to effective foreign policy. Managing the risk of resource allocation by adding public trust to the equation would increase the effectiveness of funding while lowering the cost of the desired result.

LONG-TERM VISION

The U.S. foreign policy establishment must move away from a reactive policy stance toward a proactive one. This new approach should incorporate a trust differential framework to inform current foreign policy investments in order to mitigate future losses. This framework would aid in democracy promotion in an effective and risk-averse way while helping prevent democratic backsliding and future crises. These sustainable practices would support citizens of fragile nations while improving their quality of life and the global image of the United States. They also make more efficient use of government resources.

AUTHORS

Danya Arayssi, a Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Middle East Center at the New Lines Institute, is a Ph.D. candidate in Political Science at the University of Colorado-Boulder, y. Arayssi has conducted research across the Middle East and United States on political economy, political behavior, and institutional trust. Her work has been published in Foreign Policy and the Digest of Middle East Studies, and her experience includes roles at the World Bank, USAID, Oxfam America, and the U.S. Army War College

Henry Rogers is a student fellow at the New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, where he contributes to the Middle East Center. He has experience in journalism and law, having worked in Japan and New York City, and furthered his studies in Jordan. Henry holds a bachelor's degree in international affairs with a concentration in the Middle East from George Washington University.

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Contact

For media inquiries, email
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info@newlinesinstitute.org

A: 1660 L St. NW, Ste. 450
Washington, D.C., 20036

P: (202) 800-7302