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How US Efforts at Democracy Promotion
Bolster Authoritarianism in Jordan

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Misrepresenting the Contextual and Idealising the Universal: How US Efforts at Democracy Promotion Bolster Authoritarianism in Jordan

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Abstract

Discussing the *anā ushārik* (Arabic for 'I participate') programme of the American National Democratic Institute (NDI) office in Jordan – one of the largest NDI democracy promotion initiatives in the Middle East – this paper seeks to analyse some of the ways in which external efforts at youth education and participation, despite their intentions, may actually come to reinforce authoritarian stability. It is demonstrated that US efforts at democracy promotion in Jordan attempt to reproduce what are deemed to be universally valid conditions for the occurrence of processes of democratisation, instead of adjusting to the specific political context of Jordan. Rather than challenging authoritarianism in Jordan, US efforts at democracy promotion only lead to the reconfiguration and actual strengthening of authoritarian structures of power in the country. Accordingly, the Jordanian regime is shown to be highly supportive of US democracy promotion interventions that identify a lack of knowledge, experience and civic mindedness among Jordanians as key barriers for processes of democratisation, as such a narrative is instrumental in redirecting blame for authoritarian stability away from the regime and to Jordanians at large. The paper argues that US efforts at democracy promotion in Jordan ultimately help in postponing a meaningful redistribution of power to a distant future. It is based on participant observation and qualitative interviews that the author conducted in Amman, Jordan.

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Introduction

US officials and select researchers widely praise Jordan as a 'liberalising' and 'reforming' monarchy that is alleged to be caught in a long process of slow but gradual democratisation. While such an interpretation of Jordan as a "forward-looking nation"[1] undergoing an "unfinished journey"[2] has over the past years been increasingly criticised, the actual means of so-called authoritarian upgrading still remain largely unexplored.[3] This paper investigates the stability of Jordanian authoritarianism through a focus on the unforeseen and unintended consequences of US efforts at democracy promotion. Instead of contributing to local processes of democratisation, US attempts at democracy promotion are shown to ignore and subordinate local Jordanian politics to a level of the seemingly universal. Authoritarian structures of power are thereby in fact only shown to be reinforced; an effect that is also fully in line with US economic and military support for the Jordanian regime. This paper then seeks to analyse the extent to which the narratives of democratisation that underlie US efforts at democracy promotion in Jordan not only ignore Jordanian politics, but also romanticise and idealise past processes of democratisation in Europe, in order to thereby construct a seemingly universal narrative of peaceful and civil society led democratisation.

The numerous ways in which US efforts at democracy promotion in Jordan build on universalised idealisations of past processes of democratisation elsewhere are arguably most obvious in the work of the American National Democratic Institute (NDI), whose Jordan director is from Kosovo, the head of the youth programme and the 2013 election observation coordinator from Serbia, and the head of the parliamentary programme from Lithuania.[4] The underlying assumption in this regard is that processes of democratisation in Jordan occur or do not occur for the same reasons as in Eastern Europe. It is then the international democracy promoter who engages with and makes sense of Jordan, instead of the specificities of Jordanian politics shaping the views and projects of the Western officials who work in the country. Right from the outset Jordan is thus seen as a passive recipient of a universally applicable stencil, who only shows agency when following the externally prescribed narrative.

This universal and technical nature of the capacity building interventions and awareness trainings implemented in Jordan implies that it is not anymore the

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[1] United States Agency for International Development (USAID), *Strategic Statement Jordan 2007-2011*, p. 29.

[2] Ryan, Curtis, 'Jordan's Unfinished Journey: Parliamentary Elections and the State of Reform', *Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED)*, Policy Brief, March 2013.

[3] For the notion of authoritarian upgrading see Heydemann, Steven, 'Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World', *Brookings Institution*, Analysis Paper, Number 13, October 2007.

[4] This inherent comparison of contemporary Jordan to Eastern Europe after the end of the Cold War is also a recurrent feature of King Abdullah II's public discourse. See King Abdullah II, 'Each Playing Our Part in a New Democracy', *Royal Hashemite Court*, Amman, 3rd discussion paper, March 2, 2013.

Jordanian regime or deeper structural issues specific to the case of Jordan that are problematised as primary barriers for processes of democratisation, but instead an alleged lack of knowledge and capacity among Jordanians themselves. The absence of democratic forms of governance in Jordan is thereby transformed into a problem of capacity, awareness and implementation that could in the very same form also exist in any other country, and that can importantly now be managed and addressed.[5] The fundamental unwillingness or inability to take Jordanian authoritarianism seriously in and of itself then leads to a situation in which the Jordanian regime is mistakenly viewed as an agent of democratisation and Jordanians at large as 'not yet ready' for democracy. This not only has the effect of reproducing Jordanian authoritarianism under a democratic image, but also leads to the perpetuation of highly Orientalist notions that very effectively maintain the seeming need for constant foreign intervention.

Civil Society Support as Universal Means for Local Efforts at Democracy Promotion?

Reflecting on increasing problems to spend growing democracy promotion budgets, one Western democracy promoter based in Amman remarked in late 2012 that most locally grown social movements had made themselves "immune from assistance."[6] This initial observation seems to corroborate Robinson's interpretation of external efforts at democracy promotion as constituting a consensual means of social control, which, contrary to the reaction of the social movements referred to here, is otherwise largely accepted and even internalised among the target populations.[7] Based on this understanding democracy promotion is not to be seen as a project aimed at the collective empowerment of already existing groups, but instead as a project that is aimed at their disciplining and at the channelling of collective discontent into more easily controllable and better manageable forms. A good illustration for this dynamic is arguably the NDI Jordan youth political participation programme, which was established in late 2011 in seemingly direct response to the country-wide anti-regime protests of that year and in response to rising fears among international donors about the possibility of revolutionary change.

While the focus on stability and peaceful means of protest may at first sight appear as a noble cause, the inherent problem of such programmes is their *en passant* depiction of Jordanian civil society as prone to violence, weak and practically

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[5] See Heydemann, Steven, 'In the Shadow of Democracy: Review Article', *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 1, Winter 2006, p. 150.

[6] Interview with T, democracy promoter working in Jordan, Amman, 21.11.2012. Interviewees who preferred to be anonymised are only referred to via a description of their social/ professional position and randomised letter.

[7] Robinson, William I., *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention, and Hegemony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

non-existent. Also, the implicit association of processes of democratisation with peaceful evolutionary reform both tends to idealise past transitions to democracy elsewhere and tends to ignore the centrality of street-level movements and violent conflict in these.[8] As democracy promoters obscure and obfuscate the image of (Jordanian) civil society, they however importantly open up the discursive space and the practical distance that enables and calls for the universally deployable democracy and civil society experts. Abstract ideals of 'the universal' thereby replace and seemingly render inferior the contextual contingencies of the Jordanian politics within which the democracy promoters actually operate.[9]

While neo-Tocquevillean arguments about the centrality of civil society in "Making Democracy Work"[10] have gained renewed popularity in light of the democratic transitions in Eastern Europe, various scholars have since emphasised the particularities of such transitions and the limitations of civil society as explanatory variable with a generic pro-democratic function or proclivity.[11] This paper aims to contribute to this literature by discussing the ways in which US democracy promoters in Jordan idealise past democratic transitions in Eastern Europe, in order to discursively construct a seemingly universal narrative of peaceful and civil society led democratisation. As the latter is applied in the political context of Jordan, it is argued that intersecting dynamics of misrepresentation (past democratic transitions in Eastern Europe), disregard (local context of Jordan and diversity of its actually existing civil society) and idealisation (universal narratives of democratisation) have the effect that US efforts at democracy promotion actually come to bolster Jordanian authoritarianism.

It is importantly not suggested that the USAID and NDI employees involved in the programme of concern are simply not interested in democratisation in Jordan. Instead it is argued that the very much existing commitment to democracy promotion is qualified by a strictly evolutionary understanding of democratisation and a narrowly liberal reading of democracy itself.[12] The primacy of security concerns – the Jordanian regime is one of the closest regional allies of the US – constitutes a further limitation

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[8] See for instance Mansfield, Edward D. and Snyder, Jack, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), p. 21.

[9] My argument here is informed by Mitchell's reasoning in *Rule of Experts*. Mitchell, Timothy, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

[10] Putnam, Robert D., Leonardi, Robert and Nanetti, Raffaella Y., *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[11] Tempest, Clive, 'Myths from Eastern Europe and the Legend of the West', *Democratization*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1997, pp. 132-44. Berman, Sheri, 'Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic', *World Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 3, April 1997, pp. 401-29. Kienle, Eberhard, 'Democracy Promotion and the Renewal of Authoritarian Rule', in: Schlumberger, Oliver (ed.), *Debating Arab Authoritarianism: Dynamics and Durability in Nondemocratic Regimes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 231-49.

[12] See for instance Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy,* as well as Gills, Barry, Rocamora, Joel and Wilson, Richard (eds.), *Low Intensity Democracy: Political Power in the New World Order* (London: Pluto Press, 1993).

and/or mediating factor for the pursuit of the democracy promotion project in the country. Unlike in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine during the so-called 'colour revolutions' US programmes in Jordan thus pursue a highly non-confrontational approach.

This implies the effective disregard of structural problems of authoritarian power inherent to the political system of Jordan in favour of supposedly existing cultural barriers among Jordanians themselves. Of crucial importance in this culturalisation of Jordanian authoritarianism is the universalisation of idealised imaginations of democratisation, which arguably constitutes a key underlying dynamic for democracy promotion interventions at large.[13] Attempting to reproduce in Jordan romanticised images of the context and conditions that are thought to have led to the so-called 'colour revolutions' in Eastern Europe, US democracy promotion programmes demonstrate a highly flawed and superficial reading of past democratic transitions. Also, they willingly ignore existing pro-democracy groups in Jordan, and by doing so try to cover up the fundamental contradiction inherent to US foreign policy vis-à-vis Jordan of asking for (democratic) change, but supporting (authoritarian) stability.

As highly contextual experiences of democratisation in Eastern Europe are seemingly universalised, and then, in a very different context and under very different foreign policy priorities, reapplied in form (Eastern European staff and teaching material), the democratic substance is shown to fall by the wayside. While this article does not question democracy promoters' commitment to democratic ideals, the combination of a strong security priority in US foreign policy vis-à-vis Jordan, the reliance on idealised universal assumptions of democratisation, and the relative disregard of Jordanian politics itself are shown to interact in such a way that US democracy promotion programmes in the country actually come to reinforce authoritarian stability by shifting blame for the latter from the regime itself to the supposed cultural deficiencies of Jordanians at large.

'I participate'

In December 2011 NDI established its youth political participation programme in Jordan. According to a 2013 NDI promotional video, this is by now "considered one of the largest and most successful NDI programmes in the Middle East."[14] Under its umbrella, NDI officially launched in 2012 as its main activity the *anā ushārik* (Arabic for 'I participate') programme, which was created after prior discussions with the

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[13] My reasoning here is similar to that of Ferguson, who argues that development interventions are highly standardised and consist of the same kind of activities no matter where. Ferguson, James, *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development," Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 69.

[14] National Democratic Institute (NDI) Jordan, *promotional video*, 30.10.2013, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AIH_I-fCj6k (19.02.2015).

deans of student affairs at a number of Jordanian universities.[15] NDI describes its extracurricular programme as follows:

> "Through lessons and debates, youth openly discuss democratic practices and current events while learning about the principles of democracy, human rights, political parties and elections. Ana Usharek students are able to gain skills for conducting meaningful and respectful debates with their peers, helping them to become active citizens who participate in the political process."[16]

At the time of the research NDI employed at least 16 coordinators – all recent Jordanian university graduates – who were each allocated one of the eleven participating universities, where they were responsible for a total of 85 *anā ushārik* courses. According to one NDI employee, in the summer 2012 semester alone NDI in this way trained 1,300 Jordanian students.[17] By late 2014 the programme had further expanded and already included 20 participating universities, a total of 7,500 participating students and 36 employed coordinators.[18]

One of the many fundamental differences between the transitions in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine and the political situation in Jordan is of course that the Jordanian regime is strongly allied to the US and the opposition highly critical of it, which helps explain why NDI's *anā ushārik* programme primarily focuses on education and participation, rather than on civil disobedience. Further, instead of supporting existing student and youth initiatives, as USAID did in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine,

Both in the NDI staff administering the programme – many of whom are from Eastern Europe – and in the material used during training sessions NDI's *anā ushārik* programme appears in important aspects as attempting to reproduce what it considers to be the conditions and context that enabled the so called 'colour revolutions' in among others Serbia in 2000, Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004. One of the perhaps most central common themes in these was the use of strategies of civil disobedience and the prominent role of US-supported student and youth movements in bringing down socialist-leaning governments critical of the US. Following NATO bombardments in 1999, the Serbian student movement *Otpor* (Serbian for 'resistance') – a beneficiary of USAID, National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and International Republican Institute (IRI) funds – played a central role in the overthrow of the authoritarian regime of Slobodan Milosevic. The Georgian youth movement *Kmara* (Georgian for 'enough') was subsequently modelled on the example of *Otpor* and among others received support from the US-based Open Society Foundations (OSF), while the Ukrainian *Pora* (Ukrainian for 'it's time') had been trained by *Otpor* itself, as well as aided by Freedom House among others.

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[15] At the University of Jordan participation in the *anā ushārik* course is one of the options for a community service requirement that students have to fulfil.

[16] NDI and USAID, 'Ana Usharek – Empowering youth at Jordanian universities to play an informed role in Jordan's political & decision-making processes', *Newsletter*, Edition 6, December 2014, p. 2.

[17] Interview with S, democracy promoter working in Jordan, Amman, 30.09.2012.

[18] NDI and USAID, 'Ana Usharek – Empowering youth at Jordanian universities', Edition 6, p. 2.

NDI Jordan chose to establish its own such initiative and chose to ignore groups such as the Jordanian popular *ḥirāk* (Arabic for 'movements'), which were formed during the protests in 2011 and 2012, as well as politicised student movements such as *dhabaḥtūnā* (Arabic for 'you slaughtered us'). The *dhabaḥtūnā* initiative, established by a leading member of the Jordanian Democratic Popular Unity Party, which emerged out of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) is, as one study of Jordanian civil society remarks, Jordan's "only [student] movement across universities and colleges".[19] While *dhabaḥtūnā* and the *ḥirāk* respectively do not hold in high esteem US democracy promotion activities in general, they arguably represent the Jordanian organisational equivalents to *Otpor*, *Kmara* and *Pora*, in so far as the latter also were politicised movements closely affiliated to political parties.[20]

As I return to NDI's *anā ushārik* programme it already at this point becomes understandable that given the fundamentally incomparable political contexts[21] – above all in terms of the incumbent authoritarian regimes' foreign policy orientations and the very different regional environments – the effects of NDI's *anā ushārik* programme are likely to be very different to those of *Otpor*, *Kmara* and *Pora*. Providing an indication for this disparity, one European democracy promoter working for a European institution in Jordan described his experiences with the Eastern European staff of NDI Jordan as follows:

> "These are all good people – no question. […] But when they talk it is obvious that the Jordanians don't give a shit. They're not interested whatsoever. They don't even understand what they're talking about. And they're only happy again when [name of a Jordanian civil society representative] begins to explain his view of the whole story for three hours. […] We're too far away from reality and our expectations are too high […]. Basically I would say that as a general rule they talk past each other."[22]

NDI's *anā ushārik* initiative is primarily based on the assumption that Jordanian youth are not adequately educated about democracy and that addressing this shortcoming will help increase the country's chances for democratisation. This assumption is in direct opposition to observations made in a USAID-commissioned democracy and

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[19] Al Urdun Al Jadid Research Center, *Civil Society Index – Analytical Country Report: Jordan 2010, The Contemporary Jordanian Civil Society*, p. 65.

[20] *Otpor* later merged into the Serbian Democratic Party and *Pora* eventually established its own political party.

[21] Hamid for instance juxtaposes the clear and unapologetic rhetoric of the West in Eastern Europe with that in the Arab world. Hamid, Shadi, 'The Struggle for Middle East Democracy', *Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, Vol. 1, 2011. Carapico further mentions the tendency to ignore the role of NATO bombardments in toppling Milosevic, in order to thereby portray the Serbian transition as a "pacifist, native, civilian campaign". Carapico, Sheila, *Political Aid and Arab Activism: Democracy Promotion, Justice, and Representation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 195.

[22] Interview with B, democracy promoter working in Jordan, Amman, 18.01.2015.

governance assessment,[23] and directly replicates the discourse of the Jordanian King, who – discussing the prospects of Jordanian democracy – patronisingly explained on US television that "we are so far at the start of this issue. […] How do we get the people to step into the position of power?"[24] Commenting on the King's remarks, one NDI employee responded as follows:

> "I know a lot of people got offended when he said that Jordanians know nothing about dialogue and democracy and so on. But […] not a lot of people know about […] how the system works. Do a research in Germany and […] you will be amazed how many people don't care or […] don't know how exactly a law initiative becomes a law for example. […] So people can be really offended, but look at the [electoral] campaigns – they're really like 19th century campaigns. […] Everybody is voting for very […] narrow personal interests. So when you look at that and you hear what [the] King says – I mean he's not far from the truth."[25]

Besides his critique of a lack of knowledge among the Jordanian public, what is particularly interesting in F's remarks is his own acknowledgment that the very same lack of knowledge about democratic procedures can also be found in functioning democracies. This of course fundamentally brings into question the supposed centrality of education to processes of democratisation. Democracy promoter T, who was familiar with the NDI programme, relied on very similar assumptions as F and explained that while "the intention is to use *anā ushārik* to change the system […], this is a long term project of building people who are more informed and interested in politics,"[26] further adding that NDI is "careful to not talk about domestic politics too much"[27] and instead consciously chose to focus on 'international standards and best practices'.

Critiques of the NDI programme took a very different stance on the relevance of participation and international standards and best practices for the advancement of processes of democratisation. Some political activists thus complained that encouraging participation and advocacy per se within a highly restricted political environment may instead of widening the political space actually have the contrary effect of seemingly legitimising the regime's strategy of shifting blame for ongoing authoritarianism away from itself and onto Jordanians instead. The NDI's *anā ushārik* programme indeed seems to understand democracy primarily as a matter of individual Jordanians' political culture. A 2012 newsletter published by the pro-

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[23] Denoeux, Guilain (MSI), Wilcox, Oliver (USAID) and Zawaneh, Zayyan (MSI), *Jordan Democracy and Governance Assessment* (USAID Center for Democracy and Governance and USAID/Jordan, August 2003). Available at: http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnadd348.pdf (13.10.2013), p. 45.

[24] King Abdullah II, The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, 25.09.2012.

[25] Interview with F, democracy promoter working in Jordan, Amman, 29.01.2013.

[26] Interview with T, democracy promoter working in Jordan, Amman, 24.01.2013.

[27] Interview with T, democracy promoter working in Jordan, Amman, 25.03.2013.

gramme thus among others contains so-called "Tips to be Democratic".[28] These include the advice to "[l]isten to your family members very well and respect their points of view", as well as to "[e]ngage in dialogue with your friends" and to "not cut in line".[29]

A Missing Link

The very same dynamic of discursively turning Jordanian authoritarianism into a matter of a supposedly inadequate political culture of Jordanians themselves, instead of understanding it as the effect of fundamentally unequal power dynamics, could also be noted in the discourse of F. As he explained that many of his Jordanian staff had – due to the marginal importance of parliament as a legislative body and due to the highly restrictive electoral law – not participated in the 2013 parliamentary elections, he remarked that

> "I don't get angry, but I get disappointed. […] the only way that the system will change is if there is pressure coming from people who want to change. […] my colleagues who don't want to vote – I asked them: 'ok – you have no one to vote for. Why didn't you create your own party? […] Why don't you start up a campaign to change the election system and you can put pressure on election commission? […] You know this is 21st century. Don't give me that bullshit. […] Nobody gives you democracy. You have to win it. You have to fight for it.' […] whenever people complain they just complain because they just want to sit home […] and watch TV and want democracy to somehow give birth to itself."[30]

While this activist approach is understandable given F's involvement in the democratisation of his own country of origin in Eastern Europe, it is highly questionable whether such an approach would lead to a similar outcome in Jordan. A 2003 USAID-commissioned democracy and governance assessment thus in direct contrast to F's comments found that

> "Jordan's central problem from a D/G [democracy and governance] perspective is not insufficient demands for political participation. […] [Instead, in Jordan] prospects for democratization are mostly a function of the extent of political will to reform within the governing elite".[31]

Jordanian political activist K, who was at the time also working for a Jordanian NGO, was in light of the marginal effect of public participation on Jordanian decision-making

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[28] NDI and USAID, 'I Participate – Empowering Youth at Jordanian Universities to Play an Informed Role in Jordan's Political and Decision-making Processes Program Newsletter', *Newsletter*, Edition 1, June 2012, p. 2.

[29] NDI and USAID, 'I Participate – Empowering Youth at Jordanian Universities', p. 2.

[30] Interview with F, democracy promoter working in Jordan, Amman, 29.01.2013.

[31] Denoeux, Wilcox and Zawaneh, *Jordan Democracy and Governance Assessment*, pp. 42-3.

highly critical of any efforts at merely encouraging more participation. He thus directly compared NDI's *anā ushārik* programme to the work of the Ministry of Political Development (MoPD) and argued that instead of "giving them sessions about how important it is […] to be participating in the general political life in Jordan or how to design an advocacy plan",[32] NDI should rather work towards creating a secure atmosphere for political activism in general and towards increasing the political space for all Jordanians. K then stated that

> "I feel like it's pointless to tell… it just is what the King literally do [*sic!*]. He goes on TV and says that students should be […] politically active inside universities. Political parties should be stronger. […] And then you go to the university and see that it's restricted! Ok – the guy just told us to do so! Well – it is restricted."[33]

While positive in his overall assessment, the head of a Jordanian policy research NGO was similarly aware of the inherent problem of promoting participation and advocacy per se: "The idea of *anā ushārik* is [a] very fantastic idea, but […] sometimes some of the conservatives […] use it […] to promote their traditional culture."[34] K in this regard explicitly recounted an *anā ushārik* session that he attended, at the end of which some participants concluded that the number of national list seats (27) in parliament that had been introduced in 2012 with the intention of strengthening political parties should either be cancelled or at least not increased, although doing so – as K commented – "contradicts with […] all the international standards of democracy in the whole universe."[35] K further remarked that while the programme is good for participants' communication skills, they lack critical political thinking.

The *anā ushārik* course itself evolves around five modules: democracy, human rights, elections, and the role of political parties and media in democracy. One NDI employee succinctly called the five documents on the topics an "executive summary of […] democracy, […] mostly focusing on the international standards and best practices."[36] The Arabic documents prepared by NDI for the coordinators to use as guidelines in their courses mostly stay on a general level and do not include a discussion of Jordanian politics itself, except for a timeline of the 'democratic development in Jordan 1921-2012', outlining key dates in the history of Jordan. Also, a copy of the Jordanian 2012 electoral law is provided, as well as a timeline of 'electoral development in Jordan', a selection of the international human right treaties signed

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[32] Interview with K, political activist, Amman, 18.01.2013.

[33] Interview with K, political activist, Amman, 18.01.2013.

[34] Interview with Ahmad Awad, Director of the Phenix Centre, Amman, 09.02.2015.

[35] Interview with K, political activist, Amman, 18.01.2013. Jordan's electoral law is currently based on a hybrid system that combines 27 seats that are allocated through proportional representation with 123 seats that are allocated through the highly controversial single-non- transferable-vote (SNTV) system. The latter has the effect of giving an advantage to independent candidates over those with a political party affiliation.

[36] Interview with S, democracy promoter working in Jordan, Amman, 30.09.2012.

by Jordan, a brief overview over the main political camps in the country, and central Jordanian legislation related to the role of media.[37]

While one NDI employee celebrated the programme as "the first time that Jordanians can discuss politics on universities – that was like a no-go-area before",[38] many Jordanian political activists, but also NGO workers remained highly critical of NDI's activities. In light of the restrictive disciplinary procedures at Jordanian universities that forbid "the promotion of party activities or political and regional ideas on campus,"[39] the special permission that allowed NDI to engage in political education in universities was widely interpreted as unjustified preferential treatment for a foreign institution. Illustrating the point that NDI is by many Jordanians not at all seen as neutral and non-partisan, one NDI employee explained that part of NDI's work is to assure participants that it is not the CIA. One political activist explicitly complained that "NDI has offices in universities, but Jordanian political parties are not allowed to."[40]

Asked about barriers to democracy in Jordan and the lack of any real democratisation despite decades of 'reform processes' and programmes such as the one by NDI, NDI employee S replied as follows:

> "If you step out of the […] environment of this programme you […] can see that basically you have people with lots of opinions and you have people with smart opinions and you have experts on different kinds of issues, but then maybe you'd feel also that there's maybe a deaf ear on the decision makers' side to […] maybe students, to young […] Jordanians, young leaders […]. Maybe they're not taken seriously. I don't know. […] There's nothing secret about this. So if you step out of the environment – you're sitting in a room […] with a group of very smart young Jordanians and you can solve the biggest problem of Jordan – no matter what it is. But you step outside of this group and you feel that there's maybe a miscommunication, maybe there's a missing link. I don't know."[41]

Finding democratic solutions to even 'the biggest problem of Jordan' thus seems to rely, as suggested by S, on the protective abstractness of classroom discussions that largely remain detached from the Jordanian political context itself and from all those messy aspects that can not readily be made to fit the stencil of international standards

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[37] The five documents prepared by the NDI *anā ushārik* programme are in Arabic, undated and entitled as follows (translations by the author): Introduction to democracy ['*madkhal ilā ad-dimuqrāṭīyah*'], the electoral process ['*al-'amalīyah al-intikhābīyah*'], human rights ['*ḥuqūq al-insān*'], the role of political parties in the democratic process ['*dawr al-aḥzāb as-siyāsīyah fī-l-'amalīyah ad-dimuqrātīyah*'], the role of media in the democratic process ['*dawr al-i'lām fī-l-'amalīyah ad-dimuqrātīyah*'].

[38] Interview with F, democracy promoter working in Jordan, Amman, 29.01.2013.

[39] Hashemite University, 'Student disciplinary procedures system', 2003, original in Arabic, translated by the author: ['*niẓām ta'dīb aṭ-ṭalaba fī-l-jāmi'ah al-hāshimīyah – niẓām raqm 107 li-sanah 2003*'], 3n.

[40] Interview with K, political activist, Amman, 10.11.2012.

[41] Interview with S, democracy promoter working in Jordan, Amman, 30.09.2012.

and best practices. S himself was finally to quite some extent aware of what he called 'a missing link' and of the fact that, once confronted with the reality of Jordanian politics, the limited effects of NDI's efforts at democracy promotion and youth education clearly became apparent.

Participating Even More

In addition to its education and awareness programme *anā ushārik* NDI Jordan launched in November 2012 a youth political leadership and advocacy programme called *anā ushārik +*. As part of the programme 250 former participants of *anā ushārik* were now also trained in advocacy skills and, based on agreements with various Jordanian NGOs, were provided with opportunities to undertake short internships.[42] At the end of the course the participants would then – benefiting from the gained experience and the training provided by NDI's youth coordinators – in small groups create their own advocacy campaigns. While the initial *anā ushārik* programme is based on the assumption that more education will increase the chances for democratisation, the extension of the programme is explicitly based on the assumption that besides education, advocacy has a particularly central role to play in encouraging processes of democratisation.

F accordingly explained that "[i]f you think about democracy in Germany or in [the] US – the core of it is people organising around whatever is their issue and doing something about it."[43] He further added that

> "[w]e want them to start being kind of constructive civil society actors, which means we want them to advocate for whatever they want to advocate. If they want – you know – more pigeons in the streets – fine. But we want them to use tools – advocacy tools and to […] influence the public domain […] and we don't care what kind of organisation [they intern in]. Some of them are for nature protection; some are for the disabled people. […] the project is to do with advocacy campaign for whatever the hell they want. But ideally I want to see a vibrant civil society where different groups advocate for different issues using democratic methods. That's what I want to see."[44]

Similar to many other democracy promoters, F saw the importance of advocacy training in thereby channelling public discontent into a peaceful and 'productive' path, as well as in creating public pressure on the Jordanian government to reform. Talking about Jordanian youth, he explained that

> "if the only tool they know is protests and street violence then I don't have high hopes for this country […] because sooner or later […] you're going to have a

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[42]   By late 2014 NDI's *anā ushārik* + programme had 900 participants.

[43]   Interview with F, democracy promoter working in Jordan, Amman, 29.01.2013.

[44]   Interview with F, democracy promoter working in Jordan, Amman, 29.01.2013.

critical mass on the streets and that's it – new revolution, which is not always bad, but there are better ways to do this transition to democracy. And we think that the better way would be if the youth learn about democratic tools of influencing the public opinion. Sometimes it's really difficult to actually […] make them believe that […] these tools work. But what they don't know and what I know through my experience is that every government responds to public pressure. Every – even North Korean dictator can only do as far as the public opinion allows them to. […] It works everywhere. They think it doesn't work because it's very difficult to see how the power... […]. I often use the example from where I come from […]. When you live in a dictatorship you tend to think these guys hear everything, they know everything, they can arrest you every second you know. But in reality – and that's what we learned after the regime was gone – they lived in constant fear."[45]

A number of points raised by F are of interest here. To begin with, his discourse is marked by a staunch belief in the possibilities of gradual procedural change despite many of the participating youth expressing serious doubts concerning this. A further aspect that stands out is his strong conviction that advocacy as a tool for the encouragement of processes of democratisation 'works everywhere' and his referral in this regard to his own experience. While it goes without saying that also the power of the Jordanian regime is of course limited and that public opinion clearly does play an important role, F seemed to fundamentally ignore the possibility that the reasons for authoritarian stability in Jordan might be different to those for former authoritarian rule in his own country of origin. For many Jordanians it is thus unclear how precisely advocacy, education and participation per se should for instance help solve still today largely unresolved and politically sensitive questions about Jordanian national identity and citizenship.

The head of a Jordanian policy research NGO stressed in this regard the deeply political, rather than simply procedural reasons for lacking political reform:

"How can we talk about political reform in Jordan while we are hearing some of the Israeli politicians saying [to the] Palestinians: 'If you would like to establish your independent state go to Jordan to establish it'? We couldn't!"[46]

An experienced human rights activist and employee of a USAID-financed civil society support programme was similarly adamant in emphasising that the assumptions regarding advocacy as a means for democratisation are highly problematic when applied to Jordan.[47]

Presenting advocacy in itself – in contrast to advocacy for or against a specific political topic – as central to processes of democratisation importantly allows for the

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[45] Interview with F, democracy promoter working in Jordan, Amman, 29.01.2013.

[46] Interview with Ahmad Awad, Director of the Phenix Centre, Amman, 09.02.2015.

[47] Interview with E, Jordanian employee of a USAID-financed civil society support programme, Amman, 18.03.2013.

technocratisation of democracy, as training courses in advocacy skills are then much more about seemingly apolitical aspects than about Jordanian politics. I argue here that the ensuing de-contextualised democracy promotion interventions should then be understood as processes of identity formation and confirmation on the side of the democracy promoters, rather than as conscious responses to specific issues of Jordanian politics. At the time of the research F was for example planning training courses for the *anā ushārik +* participants in campaign organising, marketing skills, as well as in 'how to create a good message'. Moreover, the NDI office was thinking about inviting the best *anā ushārik +* participants to a summer school abroad. At the time, Poland and Portugal were under consideration as possible destinations – the reasons for Poland presumably being its relatively recent democratisation in 1989 and the reasons for Portugal being, as stated by F, that "Portugal is the Middle East of Europe – in the most beautiful sense – [it is] relaxed and charming and ha[s] issues and refugees".[48]

Besides the highly Orientalist description of that which is deemed to be 'typically' Middle Eastern, Europe is in F's statement implicitly presented as the example that possible Jordanian processes of democratisation should follow. Features of Jordanian politics and Orientalist imaginations of such are thus abstracted and de-contextualised until they eventually appear as generic characteristics present also in other countries, where they however seem to be much less complicated, and most importantly, surmountable. Once the refugees are no longer Palestinian and once the environment is no longer the real Middle East, but instead 'the Middle East of Europe', the dominance of universal narratives over the specificities of Jordanian politics is powerfully reconfirmed and processes of Jordanian democratisation portrayed as realisable. As human history's supposed *telos* is thereby once again reasserted, so is the seeming necessity for democracy promoters as facilitators for its correct unfolding.

The importance of rendering the specifically Jordanian political context less relevant, in order to thereby make processes of democratisation appear as more easily achievable could also be observed during a training event for NDI's youth coordinators in March 2013, in the course of which the present NDI youth coordinators were asked to develop and discuss imaginary campaign plans. In order to 'practice in a safe environment' the participants were given a two-page document, which briefly outlined the central political, economic and social conditions of an imaginary model republic, against the background of which the discussion of campaign plans was to take place. As explained by the coordinator of the session, the idea was "to have an imaginary country so that students identify issues away from

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[48] Interview with F, democracy promoter working in Jordan, Amman, 23.03.2013. While the 2014 *anā ushārik +* summer school was held in Amman, it evolved around a simulation of the German political system with five groups of students respectively representing one of the five main political parties in Germany. NDI and USAID, 'Ana Usharek – Empowering youth at Jordanian universities', Edition 6, p. 7.

their own country and then can get back to Jordan with a fresh view."[49] Supposedly, the model had initially been developed for NDI training sessions already held in Bahrain and was now to serve the same purpose also in Jordan.

Instead of discussing concrete issues of Jordanian politics, the participants in the session were consequently asked to simulate democracy at the example of an imaginary democratic state that shared almost no similarities with Jordan, but instead with the countries of origin of several NDI employees. While democracy promoters regularly attempt to present their work as something that 'works everywhere' and deliberately distance it from any specific political context – contemplating summer schools in either Poland or Portugal and asking Jordanian youth to simulate democracy with the example of a democratic model republic – even in such attempts at de-contextualisation the centrality of 'the contextual' always lurks closely beneath the surface. The role of democracy promoters in Jordan then appears as that of ensuring by means of abstraction, comparison and to some extent direct disregard that the desired universal model always continues to discursively dominate local Jordanian politics.

In order to make Jordanian democracy appear as achievable and in order to maintain its own supposed moral authority, democracy promotion in Jordan inherently needs to downplay the relevance of 'the contextual'. All those aspects that can not readily be made to fit the liberal democratic stencil either need to be ignored or at least abstracted and subsequently compared to the imagined liberal democratic ideal type, so that eventually the cultural, institutional and moral differential that the very idea of democracy promotion so fundamentally depends upon (re-)emerges. The imagined model republic based on which participating youth were supposed to develop campaign plans is therefore – as far as the description goes – of course neither marked by a protracted struggle over the precise meaning of its national identity, nor knows any refugees, potentially hostile neighbouring states or a powerful secret service, all of which would only act as reminders that the power of advocacy to encourage processes of democratisation may depending on the context be severely limited.

Conclusion

This paper provided an in-depth discussion of a USAID-funded youth education programme in Jordan. In particular, it emphasised the processes of misrepresenting or ignoring the contextual, as well as those of idealising the universal that underlie US attempts at democracy promotion in Jordan. Efforts at civil society support and particular programmes aimed at youth education, participation and advocacy were thus demonstrated to regularly ignore (the *ḥirāk* and the *dhabaḥtūnā* initiative), de-politicise (advocacy for very specific groups and principles), abstract (the 'Middle

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[49] Interview with F, democracy promoter working in Jordan, Amman, 27.03.2013.

East of Europe') and compare (contemplating a summer school in Poland or Portugal) Jordanian politics, rather than to take it seriously in and of itself.

It was further argued that civil society support in Jordan evolves more around idealised imaginations of past processes of democratisation elsewhere than around the specificities of Jordanian politics. While this absence of context serves the purpose of maintaining a semblance of universal moral authority, US democracy promoters in Jordan of course also constitute, in order to gain political authority, a very concrete political actor. It is however precisely as a consequence of this – when democracy promoters reinforce the Jordanian regime's discourses about democratisation as being more about the education, participation and capacity of Jordanians than about redistribution of power and when political activists view democracy promoters' work as similar to that of the Ministry of Political Development[50] – that many Jordanians perceive the moral authority of democracy promotion as severely compromised. Finally, it was suggested that even in the face of such a loss of its moral foundation democracy promotion proves immensely resilient as rationale for Western foreign policies, since it functions largely independently from the context in which it operates, and since it derives its efficacy first and foremost from its mode of practice as a system of processes of 'modern' and 'democratic' identity formation. As democracy promotion is thus primarily about democracy promoters' and Western audiences' desired self-understandings, it operates outside of the narrow constraints of political context and practical success or failure.

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[50] Interview with K, political activist, Amman, 18.01.2013.

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