



The Role of non-EU External Actors in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods: The case of the United States of America

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolution and divergence of U.S. democracy promotion efforts in the European Union's Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods between 2011 and 2022. It argues that while democracy promotion has featured prominently in U.S. foreign policy discourse, its practical application has been uneven and deeply shaped by geostrategic priorities. In the Eastern Neighbourhood, particularly in Ukraine and Georgia, U.S. support for democratic reforms has often aligned with broader geopolitical objectives – namely, the integration of these countries into Euro-Atlantic structures. In contrast, in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), democracy promotion has consistently clashed with entrenched U.S. security and alliance interests, leading to a pattern of rhetorical commitment but limited and inconsistent practice. Despite brief moments of renewed emphasis, such as during the early 2000s Freedom Agenda and in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings, U.S. policy in the MENA has largely reverted to supporting authoritarian stability over democratic transition. By comparing U.S. strategies in Ukraine and Georgia with those in the broader MENA region, the paper highlights the central role of geostrategy in shaping the limits and contradictions of American democracy promotion.

Introduction

This analysis will take stock of US narrative and praxis on democracy promotion vis-à-vis the EU's Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods between 2011 and 2022. While there is little doubt that democracy promotion has gradually come to occupy an important role in US foreign policy, the actual modalities of engagement towards the Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods have deviated significantly. The different levels of commitment to democratic reform in the two neighbourhoods is explained by the diverse prevalence of geostrategic concerns in US foreign policy towards the two regions. While in Eastern Europe and the ex-Soviet space, US democracy promotion policies and support for local reform and revolutionary movements were seen as conducive to broader US geostrategic objectives—chief among them facilitating the inclusion of Eastern Europe in Euro-Atlantic structures and their integration into the European Union – in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), any promotion of political reform has long been understood as running counter to US geostrategic interests and alliance frameworks. This varying relationship, or balance, between US strategic interests and values-oriented ambitions in the two regions goes a long way towards explaining the very different modalities of engagement promoted by US administrations towards the two regions and ultimately the dismal record of US democracy promotion efforts in the MENA when compared to the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood.

The discourse and practices of the United States' (U.S.) democracy support to the countries of the ex-Soviet space has undergone significant changes over time, reflecting the evolving nature of their relationship. It's important to note that there hasn't been a single, uniform U.S. regional policy, primarily because there isn't a single, cohesive region within the European Union's Eastern neighbourhood. Instead, a group of countries has emerged with varying levels of democratic development, distinct foreign policy goals, and differing senses of belonging. Consequently, the U.S. has customized its engagement with these countries, rather than approaching them with a one-size-fits-all regional policy. In light of this, this paper specifically focuses on two countries, Ukraine and Georgia, which are part of the SHAPEDM project (out of the three, including Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia) and the European Union's Eastern Partnership (out of the six, including Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus). These two countries are

selected for analysis due to their relevance (as one of them has received EU candidate status and the other European perspective), and to draw comparisons highlighting both similarities and differences between U.S. and EU democracy promotion efforts.

Turning to the MENA region, US democracy promotion efforts – understood to encompass support for free and fair elections, the rule of law, human rights and civil society, as well as more general forms of good governance and political accountability – only began in earnest in the post-Cold War era. Following 9/11, the US administration launched the Freedom Agenda in 2003, the first time in which concerted efforts were directed across US institutions to enhance support for reform and local civil society. More importantly, the US Administration actually deployed high-level political pressure on regional allies to gradually expand the civic space and allow for free and fair elections. Yet, this political backing was short lived. By 2006, it was largely discarded as US officials prioritized security and counter-terrorism cooperation with regional autocratic allies. Since then, little has changed, and even in the wake of the 2011 Arab uprisings, US policy has struggled to reconcile the promotion of US geostrategic interests with the advancement of democratic reforms and values. Ultimately, after a brief period of renewed emphasis on democracy promotion between 2011 and 2013, US policy gradually returned to its baseline of accommodation with authoritarianism, thereby demonstrating the consistency by which US strategic interests have trumped values when it comes to the Middle East.

Indeed, two decades since the launch of George W. Bush's Freedom Agenda in 2003, little or no progress can be measured on any of these so-called value-oriented objectives in the Middle East. Most strikingly, little or no change has occurred in US funding streams and strategic thinking since the Arab uprisings. Trends of continuity have instead prevailed and, after a brief interval, the US – and much of Europe – essentially accommodated the authoritarian and counter-revolutionary backlash that followed the protests, preferring the status quo over the risks and uncertainties of proactive forms of support and engagement with Arab transition countries. Meanwhile, enhanced security, energy and intelligence cooperation with authoritarian regimes and the US's key regional ally Israel, did much to limit US policy options in the post-2011 period, as it did during Bush's Freedom Agenda and War on Terror a decade before.

1 US Democracy Promotion vs. Authoritarian Accommodation in the EU's Southern Neighbourhood

The George W. Bush administration should be credited for institutionalising and expanding US democracy programming since the 2003 launch of the Freedom Agenda. The agenda created important institutions – the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) amongst others – which aimed to coordinate and streamline US democracy funding for the region (Hassan, 2012; Alessandri et.al, 2015). As the objectives of the 2003 Agenda became gradually overshadowed by the heightened focus on anti-terrorism, many of these institutions and funding streams remained intact, but were dwarfed by enhanced political and intelligence cooperation with authoritarian regimes. As a result, little of concrete was achieved through these funding streams, not least given that US democracy promotion in the MENA became quickly tainted by the disastrous handling of the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, events that have contributed to make US democracy promotion policies in the MENA a highly controversial affair. Overall, a bird's eye view of US MENA policy since the Cold War, will demonstrate how US strategic interests in the Middle East – from energy flows to anti-terrorism, stability and trade, Israeli security and the containment of regional and international competitors – have effectively worked at cross

purposes with democracy promotion objectives. A sober assessment of US efforts to promote democratic freedoms in the MENA must therefore contend with the simple reality that US military and economic assistance essentially works at cross purposes with these objectives. Stiff opposition to the Arab uprisings from *within* the region, only increased the hardship, restricting policy options as the Obama administration sought to navigate the traditional divide between interests and values, ‘freedom and stability’ in US Middle East policy. This, combined with deeply engrained notions about US strategic interests in the Middle East and a close-knit network of interpersonal, economic and military ties with Arab regimes and Israel, have effectively made US policy highly reliant on the authoritarian status quo.

US policy between 2011-2022 (and arguably well before that) can largely be described as falling under the category of **authoritarian accommodation**¹, understood in terms of a reactive policy of accommodation with authoritarianism and general alignment with counter-revolutionary forces in the post-Arab uprisings MENA (Hamid, 2022; Yerks 2023; Gerges, 2012). Authoritarian accommodation entails the absence of concerted and proactive political pressure or support for reform. Instead, the US has consistently displayed an accommodating approach to its regional allies, one which has prioritised the interests of authoritarian Arab regimes and Israel, over the incognita of political change and reform. Much of this challenge can be summarised with reference to the so-called “Islamist Dilemma” (Hamid, 2022). The ‘dilemma’ essentially revolves around a concern that democracy would produce Islamist governments less complacent with US interests and less inclined to accommodate Israel. This has made the US into an external actor inimical to revolutionary change and with a strong vested interest in the continuation of the authoritarian status quo in the Middle East, a dynamic that is visible both during the 2003 Freedom Agenda and in the post-2011 MENA.

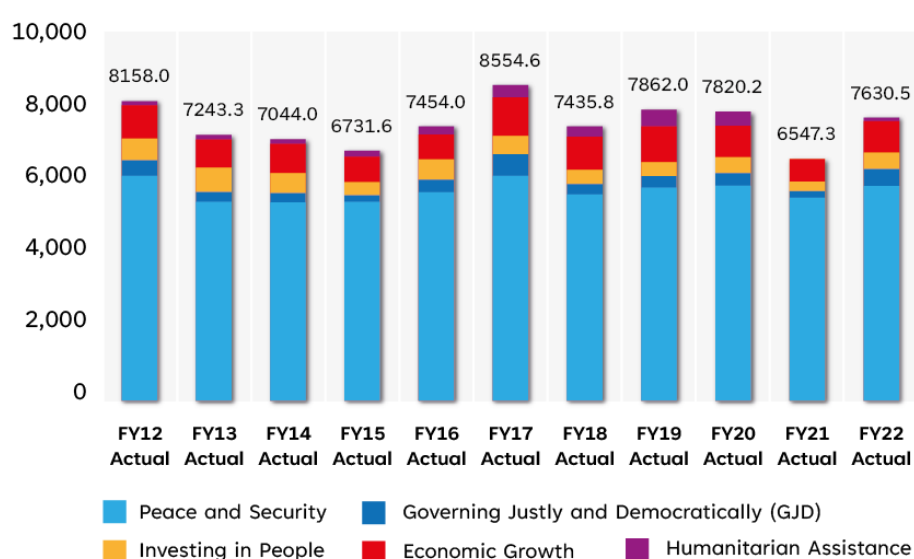
At times, an argument can be made for US policy even straying to the realm of *autocracy support*, as in the case of the US’s tacit acceptance of the 2013 Egyptian military coup. Even here, authoritarian accommodation would likely be more appropriate as Washington was not proactively supporting the return of authoritarianism, but rather coming to terms with limited political will or leverage to actively oppose the counter-revolutionary policies backed by its key regional allies in the MENA. Elements of accommodation, which could also be described as forms of *begin neglect* towards those actors most interested in promoting political change, are essentially the result of a cost-benefit of the risks entailed by reform or revolution. Forms of authoritarian accommodation are similarly applicable to the White House’s broad neglect of Tunisia’s backsliding into authoritarianism or Washington’s muted response to Saudi Arabia’s quashing of the Bahrain uprising in 2011 for example. While the US has at times sought to use negative conditionality on aid with certain states – Egypt, Tunisia and even Saudi Arabia – these have generally been limited to single issue concerns: i.e. the fate of US citizens, single activists or NGOs under prosecution (see for instance the 2023 Safeguarding Tunisia Democracy Act).

¹ The author (Andrea Dessi) uses “authoritarian accommodation” to indicate a policy which is below the threshold of proactive authoritarian support (i.e. promotion of authoritarianism) and yet well distinct from more concerted efforts to back democratic change and reform (i.e. democracy support). Accommodation reflects the cost-benefit calculus in Washington related to the risks and returns of breaking with long-standing authoritarian allies to promote democratic change and rather a more reactive policy grounded in a realist prism that prioritises stability and continuity as opposed to the incognita of change or revolution. For comparison, US policies during the Cold War in Central and Latin America can be defined as “authoritarian support” as in those cases the US had a proactive policy of engagement. The same cannot be said of post-2011 US policy in the MENA, at least according to the author.

Overall, such instances pale in comparison to the harsh sanctions and political or military pressure applied to US adversaries, from Tehran to Damascus, Beirut and Ramallah or Gaza City. Moreover, it has generally been Congress to have taken the lead in forcing some response by sitting administrations (see for instance, Cambanis, 2021; Archick & Mix, 2013; Dunne, 2022).

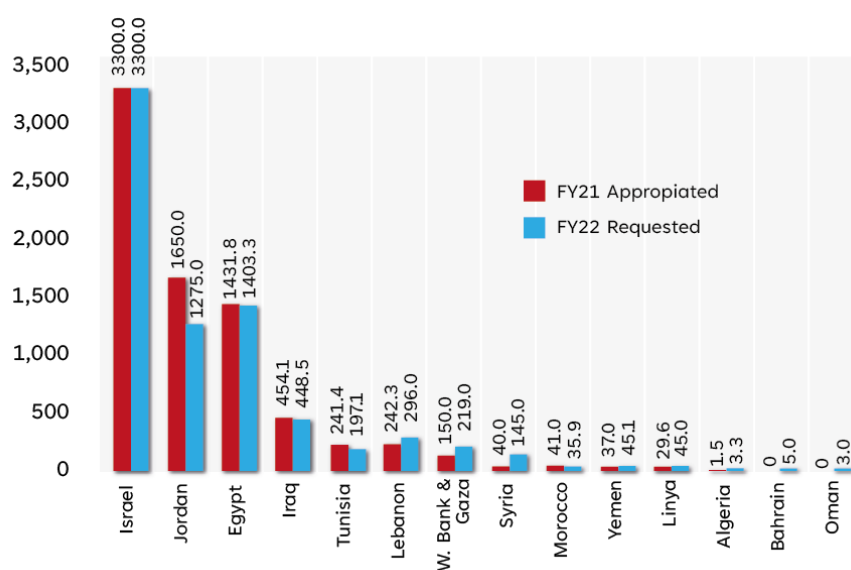
Ultimately, the distribution of US aid flows speaks volumes about where US priorities rest in the region (Figure 1 & 2). Most of these funds are directed at states which are by no means implementing democratic reforms and have instead been among the most prominent opponents of the tides of change unleashed by the Arab uprisings in 2011. At the very least, this has made the US *indirectly complicit* in the present trends of authoritarian consolidation that characterise the MENA in 2023 and far from an actor truly invested in the goal of spreading democratic values, accountability and reform in the region.

Figure 1: MENA Total Assistance by Objective (in millions of dollars)



Source: Binder, 2021, pp.9-10

Figure 2: Total Bilateral Assistance by MENA Country (in million dollars)

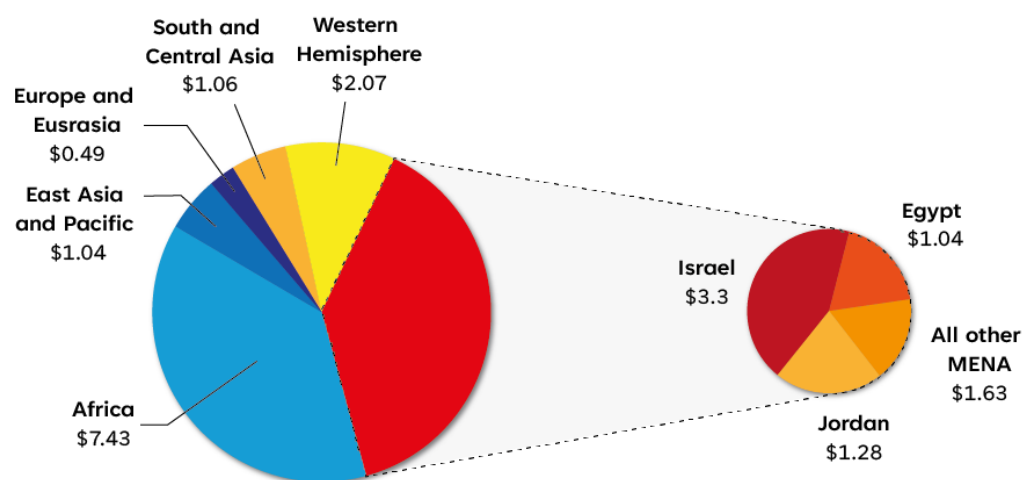


Source: Binder, 2021, pp.9-10

1.1 US Democracy Promotion in the MENA: The Freedom Agenda & Arab Uprisings

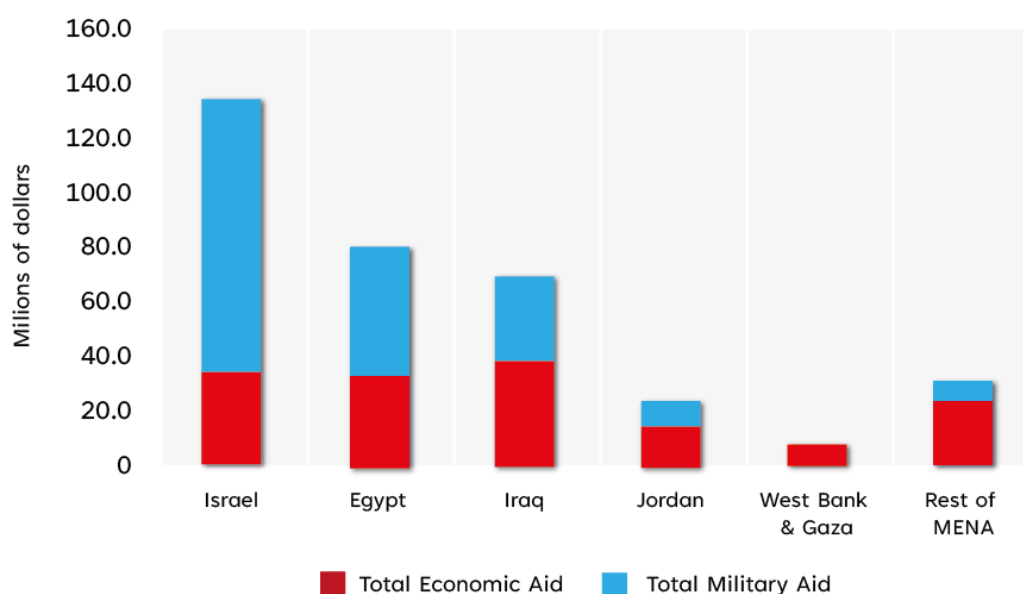
The MENA has for decades absorbed the greatest share of annual US foreign assistance, only recently being overcome by Africa (Figure 3). Between 1946 and 2021, the US – through its various agencies, including the State Department, US Agency for International Development (USAID) and other organs such as the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) amongst others – have dedicated approximately 351 billion USD in foreign assistance to the MENA region (Sharp, 2021). Three states – Israel, Egypt and Jordan – alone absorb the large majority of yearly military aid budgets for the MENA, a trend established and maintained since the late 1980s.

Figure 3: FY2022 Request for Regional Bilateral Aid (current US dollars in billions)



Source: Sharp, 2021.

Figure 4: US Foreign Aid to MENA Countries: FY1946-FY2019 (in current US dollars in billions)



Source: Sharp, 2021.

Increased emphasis on democratic values in US foreign policy would roughly coincide with Washington's rise to global power status following World War II (Ambrose and Brinkley, 2010). These concepts would influence George W. Bush's Freedom Agenda with democracy promotion becoming an important component in Washington's Global War on Terrorism (Hassan, 2008). While Bush did increase US funding for civil society and democracy promotion programmes in the Middle East, the primary focus on security cooperation with authoritarian regimes, combined with a deeper belief that top-down economic liberalisation represented the best (or least disruptive) pathway to expand freedom while combatting radicalisation, would immediately hamper the agenda's goals. The US's 2003 military invasion of Iraq, meanwhile, undermined Washington's credibility, alienating those more reform-oriented forces which Bush's so-called 'forward strategy for freedom' had ostensibly sought to empower (Yerkes, 2023; Gerges, 2012). In other localities, US pressure to hold elections produced rude wake-up calls as Islamist leaning parties secured important gains in Egypt, Lebanon and the Occupied Palestinian territories between 2005-2006 (Hamid, 2011; Hamid, 2022). These results would crystallise the so-called 'Islamist dilemma' affecting US policy in the Middle East (Sharp, 2006; Hamid, 2022); mainly that a more forceful backing for democracy in the region would likely result in Islamist leaning governments less inclined to cooperate with the US and more prone to antagonism towards Israel. This was the same narrative promoted by regional authoritarian regimes over previous decades, a narrative that has significantly influenced US and European policy and has essentially produced a zero-sum tension between values and interests in the Middle East (Gerges, 2012).

During the Cold War, it was the fear of Soviet expansion that led the US to counter revolutionary movements and align with conservative, authoritarian regimes in the region to support the status quo. In the post-Cold War, the Soviet Union was replaced by new threats that required containment or offensive rollback through enhanced cooperation with authoritarian regimes: from Saddam Hussein's Iraq to the Islamic Republic of Iran and, increasingly, non-state groups such as Al Qaeda and eventually Islamic State (IS) (and today Russia and China). Indeed, following 9/11, US democracy promotion became a tool in the broader fight against terrorism, a no so-subtle means for the Bush administration to seemingly reconcile US strategic interests with values in the Middle East. New organizations were created – most notably the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)² –, but little changed on the ground. Perhaps little *could change* as long as US strategic and military interests relied so heavily on cooperation with Arab regimes and uncritical support for Israel. Under the Freedom Agenda, Bush did enhance funding streams for civil society organisations in the region, directing these to cooperate with regimes to enhance economic growth and inclusivity as an antidote to radicalisation as well as an investment in increased freedoms (Hamid, 2011; Yerkes, 2023; Gerges, 2013). Bush's MEPI, spent a total of 547.7 million USD in the region during his tenure between 2002-2009 (Alessandri et.al, 2015) and an estimated 1.1 billion USD between 2002-2020 (Sharp, 2021). This, combined with the which also increased under Bush, represented an important novelty in US assistance to the region since the Cold War. Indeed, by 2009, the last year of the Bush administration, the "level of annual U.S. democracy aid in the Middle East was more than the total amount spent from 1991 to 2001" (Hamid, 2011). Yet, funding in FY2009 for democracy and governance programmes was a meagre 190 million USD (McInerney, 2009). This was spread across multiple countries, all of

² More information on the MEPI can be found <https://mepi.state.gov/about-mepi/what-we-do/>; Carothers, 2005; Also see, Alessandri et. al, 2015.

which were governed by authoritarian regimes, many with close political and military relationships with the US.

The underlining efforts of the Freedom Agenda were further weakened when elections led to Islamist victories in Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine between 2005-2006. The US panicked and backed down, sanctioning or undermining the democratic victors, thereby accommodating the concerns of its regional autocratic allies (Gerges, 2012; Brumberg, 2010). As a result, by 2010, the MENA region remained dominated by deeply entrenched authoritarian regimes. The prevailing attitude in the US (and many parts of Europe), meanwhile, was that democratisation, if at all possible, carried more risks than benefits. Authoritarian stability was preferable to the incognita of reform or democratisation, particularly as the latter was predicted to lead to Islamist governments. Such an approach was in many respects a reiteration of previous policies developed during the Cold War, when the US consistently opposed local revolutionary forces or efforts to promote bottom-up reform in the Middle East out of a concern that these would align with the Soviet Union (Stivers, 1986; Jamal, 2012; Bacevich, 2016). Much of the same would occur again, in the post-Arab uprising period, and particularly starting from late 2012, as concern over terrorism and instability began to cloud the original hopes of the uprisings.

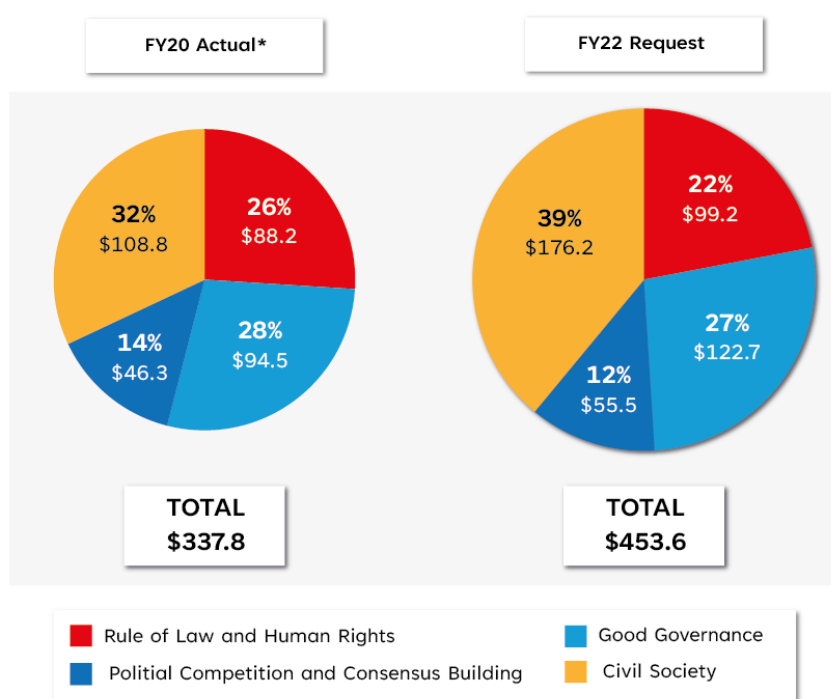
Indeed, after an initial reaction in the wake of the Arab uprisings, the US would soon return to its baseline of a realist accommodation with the authoritarian and counter-revolutionary front (Gerges, 2012; 2013; Hamid, 2022). While Obama did increase funding above Bush's levels for democracy support in the MENA, and even came to terms for a time with Islamist leaning governments, following the 2013 military coup in Egypt, US policy essentially reverted to tacit accommodation with the forces of counter-revolution. As recently noted by Shadi Hamid, the US may in fact have been "directly complicit" in the 2013 military coup in Egypt which overthrew the first democratically elected president, Mohammed Morsi (Hamid, 2023; 2022). Hamid explains that the US gave a "green light" to the Egyptian army to carry out the coup, which was also backed by the UAE and Saudi Arabia. On 1 August 2013, about a week before the Egyptian army and police force massacred unarmed Muslim Brotherhood protesters camped out in Cairo to protest the army coup, Secretary of State John Kerry remarked to the media that the Egyptian army was in fact "restoring democracy" (Egypt, 2013) to Egypt.

The Obama administration did seek to make certain adjustments and improvements to the US's aid machinery. Overall, it continued to support Bush's MEPI and developed other initiatives such as the G8 Deauville Partnership for the MENA transitions and the 2011 Open Government Partnership programme, which sought to promote accountability and transparency (Yerkes, 2023). Yet, efforts to align with and support civil society actors in certain Arab uprisings countries often met with pushback and arrests or expulsions, as occurred in Egypt in 2013. This, combined with heightened security threats after the murder of US Ambassador Christopher Stevens in Libya in 2012 and thereafter with IS, would dampen the administrations eagerness to get further involved in the Arab transition countries. Military and security cooperation increased as the US launched the anti-IS coalition and renewed military operations in Iraq and Syria. Moreover, the renewal during the last weeks of the Obama administration in 2016 of a 10-year US military assistance deal with Israel valued 38 billion USD, the single largest US military aid package at that time, also made clear the underlining contradictions and tension of US policy (Spetalnick, 2016; Sharp, 2023). Ultimately, it stands as another important example of these structural continuities affecting US Middle East policy since the Cold War and their practical implications in terms of restricting US leeway and freedom of action in the region, particularly when this

comes to supporting – let alone promoting – democratic forces of change, reform and even revolution in the Middle East and North Africa.

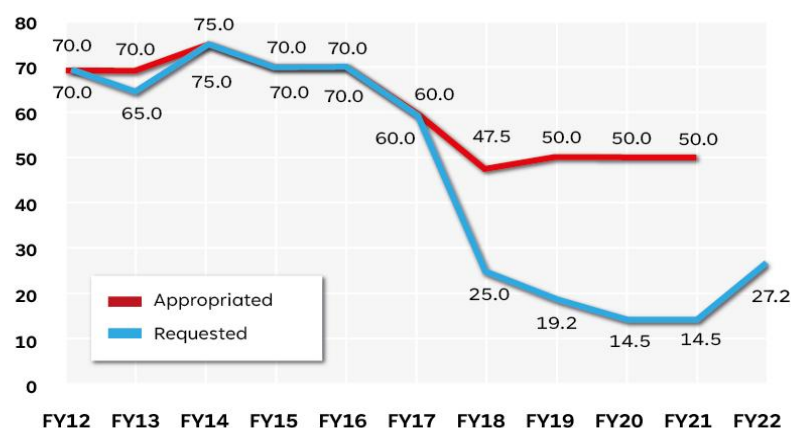
Looking backwards, and prior to 2009, the percentage of US funding for democracy programmes in the MENA averaged about 5-6% of the total annual US assistance budget. Under Biden’s FY22 request funds for the Governing Justly and Democratically (GJD) programming line stood at 6% of the total. Funding for such programmes under Trump fell to 4 and 4.5% in FY19 and FY18 respectively. Under Biden, GJD funding is further subdivided into four categories (Figure 5). In the FY10 request, funding for democracy promotion programmes peaked at 14%. Even in this case however, the 1.54 billion USD FY10 request for democracy and governance was mostly directed at Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan, which together absorbed 86%. For the Arab world, and the Arab uprising countries, the democracy and governance request amounted to a 14% increase over the 190 million USD allocated in FY09 (McInerney, 2009). Meanwhile, the Obama administration increased funding for the MEPI and Bush’s Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) by about 70% each, two organizations established in the early 2000s during the Freedom Agenda, promoting good governance, human rights, democratic freedoms and economic growth. While Congress was reluctant to fund these programmes under Obama, funding did increase through the NED, USAID and the MEPI under his tenure (see Figure 6 for MEPI funding totals between 2012 and 2022).

Figure 5: MENA GJD Request by Sub-Objective in millions of dollars



Source: Binder, 2021, p.9

Figure 6: MEPI FUNDS: requested VS. Appropriated. FY12-22



Source: Binder, 2021, p.14.

In FY11, Obama increased democracy programmes by 10% to 225.9 million USD (excluding Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan). Increases for the MEPI were also envisioned: +32% to 86 million USD compared to FY10 figures for the overall MEPI budget request in FY11, with a majority (60%) earmarked for MEPI's democracy support programmes, albeit Congress ultimately blocked much of these plans (McInerney, 2010). Between FY09 and FY14 democracy and governance programming in the MENA averaged about 380 million a year. In FY15, however, funding receded, reaching only 180 million USD, a new low point in funding since 2009 (in FY19, the request stood at 190 million USD). Largely explained by the worsening security conditions across the region, this decline mirrored a broader policy refocussing on security as well as a prioritisation of negotiations with Iran and the broader Obama emphasis on the "Asia Pivot" to China. The US would provide seed money to democracy programmes, initiatives and civil society activities, but on the whole US strategic interests progressed as normal and so did the US's cooperation with key regional allies. Others have noted how the total amounts dedicated to Arab transition countries were far from adequate: "US support following the Arab Spring represented just 1/150th of the amount dedicated to the Marshall Plan and was significantly lower than the amounts provided to the former-Soviet states in the wake of the colour revolutions" (Yerkes, 2023).

On the whole, therefore after the dust settled, the US gradually reverted to business as usual in the Middle East. This entailed accommodation with those actors' intent on rolling back the Arab uprisings and returning the region to its pre-2011 authoritarian status quo (i.e. **authoritarian accommodation**). With regards to democracy programming and the Obama administration, a passage of a 2013 report assessing Obama's FY2014 budget request for the MENA region is telling: "the US administration lacks a clear vision or strategy for supporting democracy, governance, and human rights in the region. [...] Democracy and governance programs are widely perceived to be more divorced than ever from U.S. policy goals in the region" (McInerney and Bockenfeld, 2013). The following year, in 2014, the assessment for the FY15 MENA request was even more stark: "it is remarkable how little the structure and objectives of US assistance to the region have changed since before the 2011 uprisings" (McInerney and Bockenfeld, 2014).

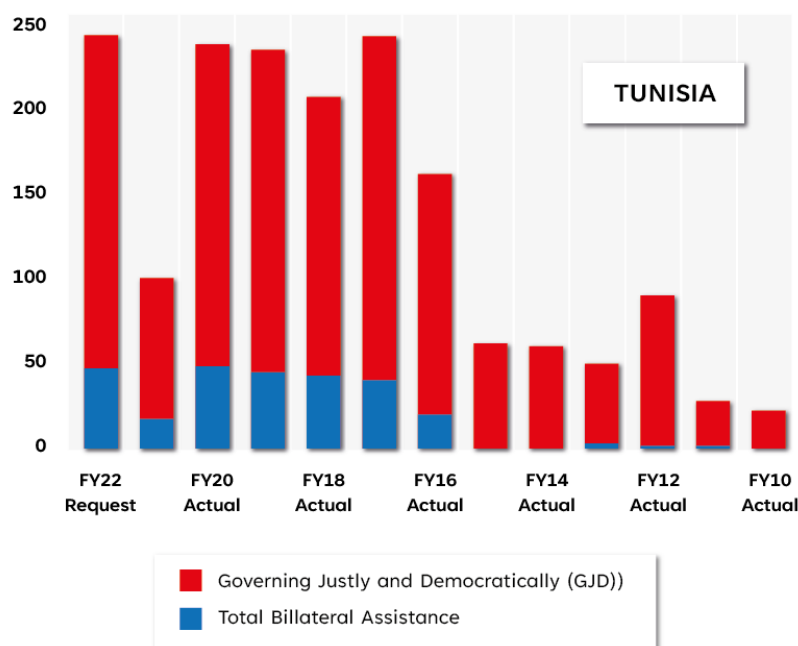
These trends were further consolidated during the subsequent Trump Administration. Trump undertook budget cuts across most US government and foreign aid programmes. His administration moreover embraced the counter-revolutionary forces in the region, beginning with Saudi Arabia and Israel – the two countries Trump visited on his first official trip abroad. US democracy promotion programmes in the MENA suffered as a result, with the FY20 request standing at 196 million USD, -30% compared to FY19 (Miller, Binder and Keeler, 2019). Meanwhile, US military assistance programmes grew to 80.9% of the overall US foreign assistance request for the MENA in FY20, an all-time record. The Trump years had significant impacts on bilateral aid programmes for individual countries. In the FY20 request, Iraq (-59%), Tunisia (-64%) and the Palestinians, where funding went to practically zero as a form of punishment to force the Palestinian Authority into backing Trump's 'deal of the century' (Miller, Binder and Keeler, 2019).

The Biden Administration's FY22 aid request totalled 7.6 billion USD. Out of this total, 76% was earmarked for military assistance programmes, standing at 5.8 billion USD. Economic support stood at 1.9 billion in FY22, while support for democracy and human rights programmes at 453.6 million, or less than 6% of the total. Still, this request represented a 140% increase compared to President Trump's FY21 request (189.2 million). While this increase deserves praise, Biden simultaneously outdid Trump's military aid request by 6% (+340 million USD) (Binder, 2021; Sharp, 2021). While funding has resumed to the Palestinians (219 million USD requested) and bilateral aid for Lebanon has also increased (+22%), the broad guidelines of US foreign assistance pledges have been confirmed. Moreover, the Biden administration has "explicitly and repeatedly expressed opposition to Congress including human rights conditions on military aid" (1.3 billion USD) (Binder, 2021). With 5.8 billion USD requested as military aid in FY22 for the MENA (76% of total), Biden's aid request for the MENA – like US policy and action more broadly – demonstrates more continuity than changes compared to the past.

The case of Tunisia, the only Arab uprising country to have progressed further down the road of a genuine democratic transition, deserves more reflection. With regards to North Africa – a region which the US has traditionally viewed as an area of greater European (and particularly French and less so Italian) action – US strategic interests are less pronounced (with the partial exception of counterterrorism). This has meant that US policy and funding streams are less pronounced compared to the Middle East, where Israel, energy flows and containment of external actors are more pronounced in US policy (Yerkes, 2023). While military and economic aid flows are still directed at North African states, including Tunisia, these pale in comparison to those directed at Middle East states, Israel, Egypt and Jordan in particular. As Tunisia's democratic transition progressed, the US did enhance democracy support funding ('Governing Justly and Democratically' budget line), increasing this from a meagre 3 million USD in 2013 to 49 million USD in 2020 (Henneberg, 2023). With US military and economic aid also increasing in this period, the US has also recognised Tunisia as a Major Non-NATO ally in 2015, granting the government preferential access to training and weapon acquisitions. Moreover, as the pace of Tunisia's transition began to struggle due to revived security threats linked to terrorism, US security funding also increased (Figure 3). At the same time, as political infighting increased, and the transition further stalled the US has not directed political pressure on Tunisian authorities to reconcile their differences. Indeed, beyond anti-terrorism and security cooperation, the US has largely kept itself at a distance from Tunisia. Significantly, for each consecutive year in office the Trump administration requested funding cuts to Tunisia (Yerkes, 2023). Following the election of President Kais Saied in 2021, and the beginning of a dramatic backsliding on democratic norms

in the country, the US has been late to react. While some debate has occurred in Congress on the need to freeze certain elements of US military assistance, funding has remained rather stable and there has been a general absence of concerted political pressure on the Tunisian presidency to halt its arrest of opposition figures and its closure of parliament (Hamid, 2022; Henneberg, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2023). Ultimately, little of concrete has been gained by US democracy funding in Tunisia, with funding streams overshadowed by military and economic aid (Figure 7) and the broader lack of high-level political pressure by the White House on Tunisia's president Kais Saied (Verkes, 2023; Hamid, 2022).

Figure 7: US Assistance to Tunisia



Source: Verkes, 2023, p.14.

2 US democracy promotion in the Eastern Europe: the cases of Georgia and Ukraine

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and their subsequent independence, Ukraine and Georgia have embarked on a journey to establish themselves as sovereign nations. Recognizing their sovereignty, the United States extended its support to facilitate their democratic transitions. The prevailing narrative emphasized the strategic importance of these emerging democracies in the region. Since 1991, the U.S. has been actively involved in supporting Georgia and Ukraine's democratic development, seeking to foster stability, good governance, and economic reforms. Efforts to promote closer ties and enhance bilateral trade and investment have been central to strengthening economic relations between the United States and these recipient countries.

Over the last 10 years, trade between the U.S. and Georgia has shown a positive trend. In 2019, the total trade value reached around \$921 million (Georgia, Office of the United State Trade Representative 2019). One notable development in the trade relations between the two countries was the establishment of the U.S.-Georgia Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which came into effect on January 1, 2009. The agreement played a significant role in promoting trade and investment between the two states, as it has eliminated or reduced tariffs on various goods and services,

providing more opportunities for businesses to engage in cross-border trade (Georgia, Office of the United State Trade Representative, 2007). In recent years, the U.S. and Georgia have also worked on strengthening their relations through the U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership Commission as well as the U.S. Georgia Business Council, aiming at deepening cooperation in economic and trade matters and promoting private sector engagement and investment between the two countries (Agenda.ge. 2022).

Similarly, the overall trend of the economic relations between the U.S. and Ukraine has been one of growth. Back in 2008, the U.S. and Ukraine signed U.S.-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership and a Trade and Investment Cooperation Agreement (TICA) aimed at promoting trade and investment between the two countries (Ukraine-U.S. Trade and Investment Cooperation Agreement). Additionally, Ukraine has been a beneficiary of the U.S. Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) program, which provides preferential access to the U.S. market for certain products (US Embassy, 2016). In 2019, the total trade value reached around \$3.7 billion, indicating a notable increase compared to previous years (Ukraine, Office of the United State Trade Representative, 2019).

Four main turning points – the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, the Euromaidan events in Ukraine from 2013 to 2014, and the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 – have shaped the dynamics of U.S. democracy support in the region. These milestones marked a pronounced surge in U.S. diplomatic initiatives, featuring high-profile visits by American officials to Ukraine and Georgia, coupled with discourse designed to bolster the democratic progress of these nations. Remarkably, in terms of financial assistance allocated to these states, fluctuations have remained inconsequential, consistently maintaining elevated levels, as exemplified below.

In the realm of U.S.-Georgia relations, alongside the revolutions, several critical junctures have also shaped U.S. democracy support. Notably, the parliamentary election in 2012 marking peaceful power transition from ruling party, United National Movement, to the opposition, Georgia Dream. Additionally, a significant focal point of U.S. democracy support has been Georgia's pursuit of closer integration with the European Union (EU). The U.S. has always been an advocate of Georgia's endeavours to implement reforms in accordance with European standards and values, particularly in areas such as the rule of law, anti-corruption measures, and human rights. Even when Georgia exhibited less responsiveness in implementing U.S.-promoted reforms aimed at advancing democracy (Freedom House, 2022) there has been no observed fluctuation in the level of U.S. financial assistance.

Likewise, the signing of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement in 2014 and granting the EU candidate status to Kyiv in 2022 have marked a transformative moment for Ukraine's democratic development and its relationship with the U.S (The Global State of Democracy, 2022). The U.S. has been a staunch supporter of Ukraine's decision to forge closer ties with the EU, extending valuable assistance to facilitate reforms and strengthen democratic consolidation. Furthermore, political elections of 2014 and 2019 in Ukraine have held significant importance in shaping U.S.-Ukraine relations. Additionally, the Russian war in 2014 and the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine stand out as crucial milestones.

2.1 The US support in rule of law, human rights, anticorruption, civil society, community-based organisations, youth and education: method and approach

The United States has played an active role in supporting democratic governance, the rule of law, human rights, and transparent institutions in both Georgia and Ukraine. Its efforts in the field of democracy support encompass various capacities, including political and diplomatic engagement.

The revolutions and the prospects of new waves of democracy development sparked high-level diplomacy between the U.S. and both countries. In 2005, then U.S. President George W. Bush visited Georgia, underscoring the importance of the relationship between the two nations (George W. Bush, 2005). Similarly, following the Maidan resolution, US politicians of the highest rank made visits to Ukraine, demonstrating their support for democratic reforms in the country (Neuman, 2014). These visits served as symbolic gestures, solidifying the United States' commitment to fostering democratic progress there.

Through political dialogue with Ukrainian and Georgian leaders and government officials, the U.S. has consistently advocated for democratic reforms, good governance, and the protection of human rights. This engagement has involved diplomatic consultations and public statements (alongside above-mentioned high-level visits) aimed at reinforcing the democratic principles. In 2009, during his visit in Tbilisi, then US Vice-President Joe Biden, urged the Georgian government to “fulfil democratic promise” of Rose Revolution and make the government more “transparent, accountable and fully participatory” (Civil Georgia, 2009). Likewise, in 2015 during his visit in Kyiv, Biden urged then President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko to “push forward the reform agenda that has been agreed upon and the Ukrainian people: stronger democratic institutions; a more accountable government; greater integration with Europe; a more prosperous economy; and resolute efforts to root out the cancer of corruption” (Bonner, 2020).

Furthermore, the U.S. has provided technical assistance and implemented capacity-building programs to support electoral processes, such as offering technical support for election administration, promoting voter education, facilitating observation missions, and working to improve electoral practices. The focus extends beyond elections to encompass transparency in governance, constitutional reforms, anti-corruption initiatives, civil society development, and the protection of human rights. Agencies like USAID have played a key role in implementing programs that aim to enhance democratic practices and governance (USAID: Georgia, 2017-2020).

Over the years, the U.S. has funded programs that strengthen civic engagement, grassroots activism, leadership capacities, and community-led decision-making. Funding has been allocated to local organizations and communities working in areas such as infrastructure, public services, healthcare, education, and cultural preservation. Recognizing the importance of supporting development and democracy initiatives in rural areas and smaller towns, the U.S. has directed funding to organizations operating also outside Tbilisi. Funding has also been provided to the Ukrainian civil society organizations, human rights defenders, and independent media outlets, with the aim of strengthening democratic institutions and processes. These initiatives have tried to foster a vibrant civil society and a robust media landscape that can contribute to democratic development (USAID: Ukraine).

The U.S. has been actively involved in supporting efforts to strengthen the rule of law, combat corruption, and enhance transparency in governance. This support, which has started even

before the Euromaidan revolution and has intensified since then, includes assistance in developing effective legal frameworks, promoting anti-corruption reforms, and establishing independent anti-corruption bodies in Ukraine such as the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) and the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO) (U.S. Embassy in Ukraine). Similarly, the U.S. promotes accountability and transparency within the judicial system in Georgia, recognizing their importance in upholding democratic principles (Georgian Young Lawyers' Association).

According to data from USAID, the funding priorities in terms of field and expenditure in Georgia have remained unchanged during the period of 2014-2021. The most funded areas of development have been government and civil society (\$19m in 2021), business (\$12m), operating expenses (\$9.8) and only then conflict, peace, and security (\$6.2m), basic education (\$2.4m), agriculture (\$2.3m), basic health (\$2.1m), energy (\$1.0m), etc. (USAID: Georgia 2021). Examining programs designed within the category government and civil society, reveal that priority is given to the projects directed towards the development of third sector and initiatives aiming at decentralization of central power.

The data of the USAID activities in Ukraine is quite similar to that of Georgia. In the last ten years the most funded areas have been as follows: government and civil society (\$90m in 2021), business (\$25m), operating expenses (\$20m), energy (\$19m), basic health (\$16m) and only then conflict, peace, and security (\$5.2m), agriculture (\$3.2m), secondary education (\$1.7m), etc. (USAID: Ukraine).

In sum, the data from USAID indicates that the U.S. has maintained consistent assistance priorities over the years. Funding has been directed towards a wide range of initiatives, including civic engagement, grassroots activism, leadership development, and community-led decision-making. This financial support extends to local organizations, rural areas, and smaller towns, recognizing the importance of democracy and development beyond capital cities. The US assistance in developing legal frameworks and establishing independent anti-corruption bodies efforts are pivotal in upholding democratic principles and ensuring accountability in governance. A focus on projects aimed at developing the third sector and initiatives that promote the decentralization of central power indicates an intention to empower local communities and distribute governance more effectively. The overview of U.S. democracy support efforts demonstrates the multifaceted nature of U.S. engagement in promoting democracy and good governance in Georgia and Ukraine. This approach recognizes that democracy-building is a holistic process that involves multiple dimensions of a society.

Upon further analysis of U.S. democracy support, one area that has received insufficient attention is the effective and consistent use of conditionality in its relations with the Georgian government. Given the current regression of democracy in Georgia, it is arguable that despite the active involvement of the United States in promoting democracy there, certain actions or policies may have inadvertently resulted in unintended consequences or encountered implementation challenges. Conditionality, which refers to linking support and assistance to specific conditions and reforms, has been applied sparingly and belatedly. It was not until April 2023, when the failure of judicial and rule of law reforms became evident, that the U.S. Department of State imposed visa bans on four Georgian judges for corruption and stressed the importance of continued judicial and rule of law reforms in Georgia (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Prior to this, the U.S. response to Georgian democracy backsliding was limited to

expressing “deep concern” through statements (Georgia: Background and U.S. Policy, Congressional Research Service).

In the case of Ukraine, it appears that since 2014 the U.S. has employed conditionality more consistently and frequently in its relations with Kyiv regarding democracy promotion. For example, in 2015, then Vice-President Joe Biden reportedly warned Ukrainian authorities that the U.S. would withhold a \$1 billion loan guarantee unless Ukraine’s then prosecutor general (accused of corruption) did not resign (Clemons, 2016). Also in 2019, then-U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch called for the replacement of Ukraine’s anti-corruption prosecutor “to ensure the integrity of anticorruption institutions” (U.S. Embassy in Ukraine, 2019).

2.2 Security and military support as a part of the democracy promotion

In the early 2000s, Georgia and Ukraine articulated their aspirations to join NATO, aiming for stronger Western ties and enhanced security assurances. The United States endorsed their ambitions, actively promoting democratic reforms and military modernization efforts aligned with NATO standards. The overarching narrative from the United States emphasized that NATO is not merely a military alliance but also an organisation founded on shared liberal values.

The outbreak of conflicts in Georgia, particularly the 2008 Russia-Georgia War and Russia’s recognition of independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, was followed by the U.S. condemnation of Russia’s actions, expressing support for Georgia’s territorial integrity, and provision of humanitarian and economic assistance. Likewise, the war in Ukraine, sparked by Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine in 2014, brought the U.S. to condemn Russia’s actions, impose sanctions, and provided major political and economic support to Ukraine. In both cases the U.S. policy discourse has emphasized the importance of upholding international law, deterring aggression, and supporting democratic values in the face of Russian aggression.

Prior to and despite Russia-Georgia 2008 and Russia-Ukraine 2014 wars, US weapons sales to Georgia or Ukraine has never been a significant part of their relationships, which concentrated mostly on military trainings, protective personnel equipment, electronic systems of surveillance and similar categories of military assistance (The US State Department and the US Department of Defense (DoD) annual reports on arms exports in National reports, SIPRI). Moreover, in view of its “reset” policy towards Russia, Obama administration has implemented a de facto “embargo” against arms sale to Georgia (Kucera, 2011).

Thus, if in 2008 the value of US military assistance to Georgia was \$78,7 million (budget defined in 2007 under J. Bush presidency (Direct commercial sales authorizations for fiscal year 2008, SIPRI), in 2009 it dropped considerably to the \$11,4 million. At the same time, in 2009 paradoxically the US increased its military assistance to Russia. If its value in 2008 was \$15,3 million in 2009 thus after Russia invaded Georgia it increased up to \$49 million (Direct commercial sales authorizations for fiscal year 2009, SIPRI). Only in 2017, U.S. President Trumps approved something that did not occur during Obama presidency and namely an estimated \$75 million deal to sell Javelin anti-tank missiles to Georgia (Mrachek 2017).

The picture is quite similar with Ukrainian case in terms of value and type of U.S. military assistance to the country. According to the SIPRI arms transfer data, the Russian annexation of Ukraine in 2014 and war in Donbas region had only a limited impact on the total volume of arms transfers in 2018-2022 (SIPRI, 2023). In the first decade of 2000s Ukraine received from the U.S.

even less arms than Georgia. Surprising are the numbers of the year 2014, i.e., Russia's invasion of Ukraine, when from the authorized \$24 million for defence articles and services, shipped value consisted of \$0 (Direct commercial sales authorizations for fiscal year 2014, SIPRI). In 2019 thus prior to the Russian large-scale invasion in Ukraine, the shipped value of the US military assistance to Ukraine was only \$4.5 million (Direct commercial sales authorizations for fiscal year 2019, SIPRI).

In face of modest direct military support, the US has still tried to contribute to strengthen security and defence sector by providing training, advisory support, and capacity-building programs aimed at enhancing the capabilities of the Ukrainian and Georgian armed forces. It also invested in development of border security and improvement of local military personals' interoperability with NATO forces as well as in strengthening their ability to countering terrorism and transnational threats. Additionally, the U.S. has supported Ukraine's and Georgia's security sector reforms to ensure civilian control, respect for human rights, and democratic governance (Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, 2020). This assistance includes professionalizing security forces, promoting human rights within the security sector, and fostering transparency and accountability. The U.S. has also collaborated with Ukraine and Georgia on cybersecurity initiatives to address the growing threat of cyberattacks. This includes sharing best practices, providing technical assistance, and promoting cooperation in cybersecurity capacity-building and information sharing (U.S. Department of State, 2020).

The Russian large-scale invasion of Ukraine has changed fundamentally years long US approach not to provide Ukraine with the lethal arms to defend its territorial integrity and sovereignty. Since February 24, 2022, the United States invested more than \$43.9 billion "in security assistance for training and equipment to help Ukraine preserve its territorial integrity, secure its borders, and improve interoperability with NATO" (Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, 2020).

3 Conclusions

US democracy promotion funding, tools and policies have pursued rather different trajectories in the EU's Southern and Eastern Neighbourhood. Mostly driven by different geostrategic priorities in Washington, to the East the US has been able to reconcile its rhetoric more aptly on values and interests in foreign policy. Looking to the Southern Neighbourhood, a region where US strategic interests dominated over the promotion of values, the outcome has been rather different. Here, the prioritization of regime survival has taken precedence over more fine-tuned efforts to enact political reform, a dynamic that has survived and even become reinforced in the wake of the Arab uprisings.

3.1 Democracy Promotion in the MENA: All Quiet on the Western Front

With authoritarian trends well consolidated throughout the MENA, it is hard to see spirals of light for the prospects of democratic change and reform. The popular protest that rocked many countries in 2019 have been repressed and largely forgotten, as ruling elites exploited COVID-19 closures to clamp down on dissent. Yet, the conditions are brewing in the region for the next eruption. Socio-economic and political indicators across much of the MENA region as worst today than they were in 2010 and the broader international setting of great power rivalry and competition do not bode well for the prospects of democratic change or opening in the region. Regimes and counter-revolutionary forces are emboldened and, on the offensive, thanks to high

energy prices and an increased propensity to diversify and balance relations between East and West.

The US and EU, meanwhile, are increasingly driven by security first and stability-oriented policies towards the MENA. The pre-2010 approach of stability vs freedoms or instability and chaos has returned. With migration management, energy security and the new competition with China (and Russia) dominating agendas and debates, there appears little hope for significant change to US foreign policy paradigms applied to the Middle East. Europe has little room to manoeuvre in this regard, used for decades to simply follow the US lead in the Middle East (Dessi and Ntousas, 2021). The EU, or at least certain of its important member states, have largely been complicit in the US policy and tacitly aligned with its general readings of the region in the post-Arab uprising period. Trump aside, EU states were enthusiastic backers of the Obama approach to the region and did little of concrete independently to support the transitions, particularly in North Africa. The traditional division of labour moreover persisted, whereby the Europe tends to take more of an active focus on North Africa, while leaving the heavy security and diplomatic efforts to the US in the Middle East (including most notably on the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian files). This has generally made the EU into a ‘payer’ and not a ‘player’ in the broader transatlantic approach to the Middle East. In a similar fashion to the US democracy programming, however, EU funding and engagements along the good governance, human rights and democracy line have repeatedly fallen through and delivered little results. Again, the lack of high-level political efforts backing this funding, and the reality that at the level of high-politics, US administrations and EU leaders have largely progressed with a business-as-usual approach to the Middle East, has limited the space for these investments to bear fruit. While the US can be correctly criticised for the prevalence of military over economic or democracy aid in its yearly funding appropriations for the region, the EU’s focus on migration management and hesitancy to challenge the US on key Middle Eastern files like Israel, Saudi Arabia or Egypt, cannot make it exempt. While nominally aligned in terms of interest and values, US and EU policies in the Middle East have suffered from similar hardship in reconciling the former with the latter. Instead, the tendency, since the interwar period, has been that of bending one’s values to justify the pursuit of what are in essence material, monetary and extractive interests in the Middle East and North Africa.

3.2 U.S. democracy (un)learning and adaptation in the EU’s Eastern neighbourhood

Last two decades the U.S. displayed a high level of financial aid, backing for significant reforms, increased diplomatic involvement, and endeavours to safeguard their sovereignty. Assessing the effectiveness of U.S. democracy promotion is a challenging undertaking, mainly due to the influence of internal political dynamics on the trajectory of democratic reforms in each country. Supporting democracy is a long-term commitment, and its impact may not always be immediately apparent or straightforward. Moreover, evaluations should not solely concentrate on outcomes but also consider the lessons learned and the ability to adapt.

The interplay between the local political dynamics and external democracy promotion in Georgia and Ukraine has led the U.S. to reflect on its past policies there and learn some valuable lessons, described as follows: (1) **Importance of local ownership.** One of the lessons learned is the significance of fostering local ownership and empowering local actors in the democratic processes. The U.S. has recognized that sustainable democratic development requires active participation and leadership from local stakeholders, including civil society organizations also at the grassroots level (USAID Georgia: 2020-2025). (2) **Comprehensive approach** to democracy

support: The U.S. understands that promoting democracy goes beyond electoral processes. It involves supporting a wide range of democratic institutions, strengthening the rule of law, combating corruption, promoting human rights, and fostering a vibrant civil society. The USAID's new Country Development Cooperation Strategy for Ukraine reflects this shift. It emphasizes a new approach called "journey to self-reliance." This approach focuses on empowering Ukraine to become self-reliant in implementing reforms and strengthening citizen response, economic and government capacity, as well as fostering inclusive development, including gender equality. The aim is to support Ukraine's progress towards becoming more self-sufficient and empowered in its democratic development (USAID Ukraine). (3) **Context-specific approach:** Each country has its unique political, social and historical context, and the U.S. has learned the importance of tailoring its democracy support strategies to the specific needs and challenges of each country. For example, to address governance backsliding in Georgia, USAID will transition from broad institutional and procedural reforms to supporting citizen-responsive governance, ensuring accountability at all levels of government (USAID Georgia). (4) **Long-term engagement:** The U.S. has recognized that democracy support is a long-term commitment that requires sustained engagement. Building and consolidating democratic institutions and practices takes time, and the U.S. has learned the importance of maintaining consistent support and adapting strategies as needed over the long term.

US democracy promotion in the EU's eastern neighbourhood has consistently aimed at facilitating the integration of Georgia and Ukraine into the European Union. Consequently, Washington's collaboration with Brussels in the realm of democracy support has been marked by a blend of complementarity and cooperation. They frequently employ similar strategies, such as employing conditionality to incentivize and propel democratic reforms, enhance governance, and uphold human rights. While their actions often align and reinforce one another, there can also be instances of nuanced divergence in their approaches. The US frequently situates these nations within the broader context of its democracy promotion strategy, whereas the EU's approach may bear the imprint of its enlargement policy and the aspirations of individual countries to join the European community. This emphasis places Brussels at the forefront of addressing the intricate technicalities associated with the implementation of EU-Georgia and EU-Ukraine Association Agreements, as well as Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements.

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