Throughout the Middle East, especially among the region’s youths — about 60 percent of the population are less than 25 years old — democracy is at a crossroads. Will the United States help the region’s new generation of leaders or turn a blind eye, as presidents have done in the past? The choice is ours.

We must confront the question of what democracy means in the Middle East. When democracy was imported there, it meant something different than when it was brought to the United States and other democracies, where it meant something different than in Europe. The question is: What does democracy mean in the Middle East? What are the appropriate conditions for democracy to emerge and flourish there? And then, what is the United States’ role in supporting and promoting democracy in the region?

The United States must support the region’s new generation of leaders. When the United States supported the 1979 Arab-Israeli peace treaty, it helped stabilize the region and the Cold War standoff. Support for authoritarianism in the Middle East was not the United States’ strong suit in those days.

Many in the region believe that the United States practices democracy in America but supports orphans of the United States in places like Egypt and elsewhere, the anger is spilling into the streets. Large protests have placed the United States in a bind. What happens when President Obama, who has been a critic of authoritarianism in the Middle East, is no longer in power? Will the next administration be more successful in supporting democracy in the region?

We must also consider how the United States can support democracy in the region. Many in the region believe that the United States practices democracy in America but supports orphans of the United States in places like Egypt and elsewhere, the anger is spilling into the streets. Large protests have placed the United States in a bind. What happens when President Obama, who has been a critic of authoritarianism in the Middle East, is no longer in power? Will the next administration be more successful in supporting democracy in the region?

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