



## DEMOCRACY: RISING TIDE OR MIRAGE?

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### **CHAS. W. FREEMAN, JR., president, Middle East Policy Council**

Although they're not so sure about this in the Middle East, everybody in Washington knows that history ends in the triumph of democracy. The only question is how far along different peoples are in progress towards this end of history. Of course, to visit the Middle East is to discover, to paraphrase Tolstoy, that every country is undemocratic in its own way. And the conventional wisdom in Washington – which is self-congratulatory about a rising tide of democracy in Iraq, in Lebanon, in Egypt and even in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Gulf – is greeted more often with derision than approbation by the people who actually live there.

We're here today to talk about the question of what is happening in the region. Clearly, changes are occurring. Is what is happening democratization or something else? Is what is happening going to take us to some definitive conclusion? I, for one, in the spirit of the Middle East Policy Council, have not a clue to the answer to any of these questions. We firmly avoid taking positions on issues; we simply raise difficult questions about them. And we have here with us four people who are splendidly qualified to address these issues.

### **MARINA S. OTTAWAY, senior associate, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**

I will pick up one image that Chas. used: the triumph of democracy at the end of history. If the end of history comes with the triumph of democracy, the Middle East has plenty of history ahead of itself yet. This does not mean there are no signs of change; there a lot of signs of change right now. It does not mean that democracy is not possible in the Middle East or in Muslim societies. That's an issue that we need to put to rest once and for all. But a lot of different and conflicting trends are alive and well in the Middle East at this point, and it is much too difficult to predict how the story's going to develop. I'm reasonably optimistic. I think it is going to end with a much greater degree of democracy than what we have seen to date. But when is that change to take place? Trends do



not amount to real change.

Let me start talking about the positive trends. One of the really important ones is that the concept of democracy being discussed is really liberal democracy, what we like to think of as Western democracy. But we should stop calling it Western democracy because it's really a much broader concept, something we all hope will become a universal concept, not just a Western concept. These ideas are gaining a much greater degree of acceptance. It's a trend that has developed over a period of time, but I think it's really coming to a head now.

Yesterday afternoon, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the Carnegie Endowment did a joint launch of the third (2004) Arab Human Development Report, which has just been released. This report is a very remarkable document. It represents the most wholehearted embrace of the concept of liberal democracy that I have seen in similar documents. It even represents a change over the previous documents. One of the most remarkable things to me is that the report goes through, one by one, some of the arguments that have been historically used by Arab intellectuals to argue that democracy is not suitable for the Arab world. The report refutes them. It comes out in the end with a wholehearted embrace of the concept of liberal democracy.

Embracing the concept is a long way from actually being able to implement it in practice, but there has certainly been this ideological change. What is most remarkable is that a good number of the authors, including the principal authors of the report, were people who 20 years ago would never have embraced the concept of liberal democracy. Many of them are people who grew up intellectually in the tradition of Arab nationalism, Arab socialism, Nasserism, so there is a remarkable change in their thinking.

These are ideas of intellectuals. The question now is how are those ideas being propagated? How is it possible for these ideas to move from the realm of intellectual discussion to the realm of widespread political discussion in which a much broader segment of the population participates? This is a matter of concern. Until recently, the Arab liberals have not been terribly successful in spreading their message to a broad segment of the population. I'm not sure I have an adequate explanation for this – whether it is social distances, which are very strong in many Arab countries – but there has been a break between the discourse of the intellectuals about democracy and what transpires more at the popular level. But certainly these trends are going on now.

In addition to intellectual trends, we have seen specific events, such as the election in Iraq. These elections, however, are the least important in terms of the trends because they were not the result of a domestic process but a foreign intervention. The question is to what extent the domestic process is getting retrofitted into these elections. But there are certainly signs of change in Iraq.

In Lebanon there are also signs of change, as in Egypt and Palestine. Again, however, there is a major exogenous factor – the death of Arafat – which was bound to bring about a degree of change. We'll know a lot more after we have seen the result of the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council.

Before these trends can turn into democracy, there are a number of specters that have to be put to rest. There are a number of really serious problems haunting the Arab



world at this point, as they have haunted all democratic transitions that we have seen since the fall of the Berlin Wall. This is not something unique to the Arab countries, except for the problem of Islamic fundamentalism, to which I will come later on.

What are the specters haunting democratic transformation? The first is the specter of sectarian strife. This is a more serious problem in some countries than in others. Egypt, for example, has a reasonably homogeneous population. It has a Coptic minority, but it's a relatively small minority. There are certainly problems with the rights of the Copts, but I don't think you are likely to see sectarian strife in the real sense of the term. There is a definite possibility of sectarian strife in Iraq and Lebanon. One of the real dangers in Lebanon is that, as the country moves out of Syrian control, it's going to plunge back into some of those conflicts that invited Syrian intervention in the first place.

Related to this specter of sectarian strife is something which is beginning to be quite visible in those areas that have an important Shiite population: the rise of the Shia. Some people are saying that there is a Shia moment right now, that this is a time when Shia may finally gain an influence proportional to their numbers. And there is a very interesting development here that has not

received much attention. Look at Saudi Arabia and these local elected councils, which have been dismissed by many, including me, because the councils have no power. One thing that has happened is that all the councils in the eastern part of the country are now controlled by Shia. Not only are they controlled by Shia – this is where the Shia minority lives – but this is clearly an assertion of Shia power, so certainly the specter of sectarian strife is there.

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Second, there is the specter of nationalism. There is a Lebanese nationalism manifested vis-à-vis Syria, but there is also an ethnic and religious nationalism within this broader one. The great danger is that sectarian nationalism is going to triumph once the Syrian presence has been removed. There is a major issue of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq and the definite possibility that – particularly if the Kurds get what they want – this is going to feed the nationalism of, for example, the Berbers in North Africa, where there has been a longstanding problem.

Finally, there is the specter of Islamic fundamentalism. You cannot talk about a democratic opening in the Arab world without talking about a much greater role for Islamist organizations. The Islamic organizations are there, and they have considerable support. Nobody knows for sure what would happen in free and fair elections if Islamist parties were allowed to register and to compete without any hindrance. There is the example of Algeria, where they essentially won the election or would have won if the



elections had been allowed to continue. This does not mean the scenario is going to repeat itself; the case of Algeria has many, many peculiarities that I don't have the time to discuss. But certainly, there is this very important factor out there. The existence of these Islamist movements with their broad base of support could be a tremendous help to the democratization of these countries if they joined the democratic trends. And, of course, it's going to be a very serious hindrance if they don't. The most likely development we can expect is that the Islamist movement will divide and that some will join the democratic trends and some will not. I don't think, at this point, we are in a position to say how they will divide.

These three major issues stand in the way of a democratic transformation. How they are handled is going to determine, I think, whether the outcome of what everybody's calling the "Arab Spring" is going to be the Czech Republic or the Balkans.

**AMB. FREEMAN:** Thank you Marina; that was superb. I think there are two questions that you didn't address on which I know you have views, and I hope we can come to them in the discussion period. The first is the difference between elections and democracy and, with specific reference to Iraq, whether the brave turnout at the polls represented a decision by the Iraqi people to accept the framework for constitution-making that the occupation had imposed, or whether it represented a vote by each community for its distinct, incompatible vision of Iraq: in the case of the Shia, a centrally governed, strong Iraqi state dominated in some manner by Shia; in the case of the Kurds, autonomy verging on independence or actual independence; and in the case of Sunni Arabs, neither of the above, but rather an unwillingness to participate in disempowering their own community. So the question of what the significance of the elections in Iraq was, in terms of both constitution writing and democratization as well as the future of the country is something that we will want to get into.

The second issue has bothered me for a long time, and I hope all the panelists will in due course offer opinions on it. This is the question of whether democracy is possible in a rentier state. If you consider the history of democracy in the West, the mother of parliaments, the British House of Commons, was convened by the king because he required money. He couldn't get money without taxing people, and in the British constitution that required the approval of the people's representatives. There was always a tremendous tension between the Commons, which wanted to restrict the king's spending authority, and the king, who wanted to spend a lot.

Now we find in the rentier states where experiments with democracy are occurring, as in Kuwait or Bahrain, that the money comes from the king or the amir, and the parliament distributes it. The monarch doesn't want to spend money, but the parliament does. This is an inversion of the normal situation, and it raises questions about whether accountable democratic government is possible, given this structural inversion.



**JILLIAN SCHWEDLER, assistant professor of government and politics,  
University of Maryland**

What is it that we're actually seeing? Is there a rising tide of democracy, or is it a mirage? In your opening comments, you made reference to this teleology, which is tremendously important. When we look at a lot of the transitions in the region and see that they're stalled, we sort of stop there and say, "We're not making progress. We're stalled." I think you end up missing a lot of different practices and developments that are emerging even in stalled contexts, particularly in states that have opened up the political sphere a little bit and stopped. The stalled metaphor doesn't really capture what's going on. A tremendous amount of change has happened in the decade since Jordan and Yemen both initiated openings and didn't really push them very far. So I wanted to use those cases as an example.

In the stalled transitions, we tend to focus on elections, as you mentioned. How important are the elections? Is electoral politics really making legislation, et cetera? Typically the answer is no. In Jordan, we've constructed a nice system where you can have free and fair elections; the electoral system's structured in a way to produce particular results. In the early '90s, we also introduced legislation whereby anything passed by the lower house has to be approved by the appointed upper house, thereby ensuring that nothing the king doesn't want is ever going to get out of the house. The king's never going to have to use the veto.

This has been the focus of our attention, but I want to talk about two things that aren't systematically addressed. The location of the ruling regime vis-à-vis the sphere of political contestation is extremely important. Jordan and Yemen are very instructive in examining this. They're both cases of top-down, elite-led political openings for very different reasons. They both stalled in the mid-'90s, for very different reasons. But you see a separate issue at stake in terms of the regime vis-à-vis the elections: In Yemen, the regime claims legitimacy because it wins elections; in Jordan, that's not the case. In Jordan, the king sits above the sphere of political contestation, and this has serious implications for the activities of opposition parties and movements within that public sphere. In Yemen, alliance with the regime is the only game in town. You are either allied with the regime or you're out. There is no "king party." Obviously, you have pro-regime parliamentarians, so you have a bloc, but there's no ruling party that you are either allied with or you're out of power. This has significant implications for the type and quality of engagement in the diversity of political parties.

So Yemen would be a case like Egypt. And the regime has different issues at stake in winning elections. Of course, Jordan structures the electoral system to produce particular

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results, but there's something very different at stake for Jordan in allowing a diversity of voices, whereas in Yemen you're seeing more and more people who want to be politically engaged. You have to be in the ruling party or you're out. That's been particularly the case since the defeat of the Yemeni socialist party in an armed conflict. There is one ruling party in Yemen, and the Islamist party – Islah – is really caught. Do they continue to try to ally with it or move into the opposition? The stakes are really high.

In Jordan, the Islamic Action Front can be a loyal opposition. It can ally with different parties; it can be pro-regime on certain issues. And the location of the political party or the regime in the sphere of political contestation is very important – even in stalled contexts, even though we're not seeing democracy moving forward to the end of history. I think this bears much more serious attention than we've given it.

The second issue I wanted to raise is that, outside the sphere of formal political contestation in terms of elections, and even to some extent attached to that, we're seeing significant changes in political activities in both of these countries. Again, the processes aren't going forward, so in both the countries, with an important difference, you are seeing the emergence of Islamic-leftist cooperation. It's not only in these two countries, but also in a large part of the region.

I'm engaged in a collaborative project exploring this throughout the region, and I'm going to pose some possibilities of the significance of this with the caveat that obviously a lot more work needs to be done. In Jordan, after the '89 election, the Islamists held approximately 40 percent of the seats. Leftists, nationalists, socialists, liberal parties and other opposition parties held about 20 percent of the seats. That's 60 percent, not such a happy situation for the régime. Of course, a new electoral law was introduced before the '93 elections, and opposition parties won about a third of the assembly. With two thirds, you can pass what you want and relegate opposition parties to small minorities.

Had the Islamists and leftists allied in the '89 parliament, they could have done a lot. But they didn't. They would not talk to each other; they did not meet with each other, even though they actually shared some common interests – particularly around the question of Palestine, the question of Iraq, et cetera. There were no cooperative activities. After the '93 elections, they together formed an opposition bloc and to this day, every month, all the opposition parties go to the headquarters of the Islamic Action Front and meet there. These are enemies; they oppose each other ideologically and on a lot of issues, but they meet. They engage in cooperative activity on very specific issues for very specific ends. They're not an alliance; the Islamists are clearly the dominant opposition party. But it's really significant that the fear of engaging with the ideological is not there. An evolution is taking place. They cooperate on a number of issues and on protests. Where they didn't cooperate before, they're willing to cooperate now.

The emergence and spread of these types of activities may be extremely significant. They bode very well for the question of tolerance, live-and-let-live cooperation – what we would like to see if we were going to build a democratic society. These types of activities are completely lost in our attention to elections and stalled democracies, et cetera. So I think we need to look systematically at that.

And I'll just end by way of the caveat of what is happening in Yemen. The Islah party



is not actually a cohesive party in the way the Islamist party is in Jordan. It's a number of different tribal and Islamist groups. Sometimes the Islamist groups struggle with the Wahhabist versus the Zaydi trend, so it's a complicated party. But from the beginning of the unification, it served as an ally to Ali Abdullah Saleh's ruling party, when the socialists were in the political sphere.

With the defeat of the socialists, Saleh did not need the Islamist party anymore because he was really the only game in town. So over the years we've seen a number of Islamists argue whether they should remain allied with the ruling party or break off and join the opposition. A number of leaders within the party, particularly from the Muslim Brotherhood, have been exploring ties with Yemen Socialist Party (YSP) leaders, pushing that forward. And there are also other voices in the Islah party who are adamantly opposed to this.

Pushing these cooperative activities forward, Jarallah Omar, a deputy director of the YSP in Yemen, was invited in December 2002 to address the Islah general assembly. It was a huge break with tradition to invite a socialist to do this. Omar addressed the assembly, and he was shot and killed as he left the stage by someone representing a strong faction of the party that rejects this type of cooperation.

I raise this example to say, let's not make too much of it; let's not say this is happy pluralism flourishing. But there's something happening here that gets lost in the attention to just progress towards democracy. Looking systematically at these various types of cooperative activities that we seem to have missed is going to tell us a lot about how deep pluralism and tolerance run.

**AMB. FREEMAN:** That was a fascinating excursion into two examples that we don't pay enough attention to. When we come to discuss Iraq, I think this is probably quite relevant. You are, in a sense, describing a situation in which, despite seminal differences between parties and individuals, they accept the framework of the contest and are therefore able to form shifting coalitions on specific issues. This sounds like normal democratic politics to me. Whether that is the case in Iraq or not is going to be key as we either move forward or don't in the coming months.

**SHIBLEY TELHAMI, Anwar Sadat professor for peace and development,  
University of Maryland**

I think we all agree that, no matter how we define democracy, the Middle East badly needs political and economic reform, and that most people in the region desperately want it.

I'd like to focus on two aspects of this issue. One is the extent to which American foreign policy is linked to democratic moves in the region. The second is how the public sees both the issue of democracy and the American role in that issue. I will begin with the American role. In our public discourse, there's been a very quick move to claim all of these things that have transpired as moves towards democracy – in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, the Palestinian areas and Iraq. One of the failures in this discourse is to differentiate between the impact of the Iraq War itself on the issue of political reform in the region and the advocacy of democracy as a priority in American foreign policy and the



actual consequences for political reform in the region. Those are not the same things. To begin with, I would argue that the consequences of the Iraq War have been largely negative on the issue of reform in the Middle East, and that the consequences of the advocacy of democracy have been more positive on reform in the Middle East. Let me give you examples of what I mean and how the region sees it.

I do public opinion polls in six Arab countries: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan. I ask questions about political issues and foreign policy, the United States, the role of the media. In 2004, which is the last one I took, we asked people in those six countries: do you believe that the Middle East is more democratic or less democratic than it was before the Iraq War? The vast majority of people in every country believed the Middle East had become less democratic than it was before the Iraq War. We asked why that was the case. Certainly part of it is probably psychological. Ninety percent of the people opposed the war, and it's very hard to come back and say, well, something good came out of it.

But I think there's something objective that they're seeing that transpired before, during and immediately after the war. You had a situation where 90 percent of the public passionately opposed the Iraq War. They believed that it went against Arab interests.

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Arab governments had to make a strategic decision whether they supported the United States or not. They made a strategic decision generally to support the United States, and in the process they became far more insecure. They preempted organizations, they arrested people, they limited freedom of

speech – and in the case of Egypt, extended the emergency law on the eve of the war. That's what the public saw, and that is what the public is reacting to. So, in general, I think the war has had, at least in the short term, a negative impact on reform.

The advocacy of democracy I see as a completely separate issue. One can even argue that the Iraq War delayed the possibility of democracy. The advocacy of democracy has had a generally positive impact, although I think it is sometimes exaggerated.

I want to state again that as of 2004, based on our survey, when you asked Arabs whether they believed American policy intends to spread democracy in the Middle East, the vast majority said no. So there is mistrust. The public in the region does not see the advocacy of democracy as a priority in American foreign policy, and they're basing that on a historical trend: the reversals in the past, the contradictions, and the double standards on a variety of issues. They think this is a tactical move by the United States.

Marina has already talked about Iraq. I think, in general, having elections is good;



people in the Arab world are somewhat inspired by elections. But the general interpretation is that you still have an American occupation, that this is a Shia empowerment; and that there is an intent to weaken the Arabs in the Muslim world. In the case of the Palestinian areas, I think it's fair to say that it's not a direct consequence of the advent of democracy. The Palestinians had elections in the middle 1990s. They had been asking for elections for a couple of years, but they were not granted elections while Arafat was still alive, for fear that he would win and be empowered as a consequence. In fact, there was a delay of elections until Arafat died.

In the case of Lebanon, it's not an issue of democracy. But it is important for democracy to have people stand up to authority and take risks. That's inspiring. The sight of hundreds of thousands of Lebanese taking to the streets is consequential for people in the Arab world. But if you look at the responsiveness of Syria, one can argue that the American factor was only part of it. Clearly, the demonstrations themselves were first and foremost driven by the assassination of Rafik Hariri. But the Syrian responsiveness was not related only to the American position. It was related to the fact that you had a UN resolution and a French-American position. The Syrians could probably have withstood American pressure if they had had unanimous support in Europe and the Middle East. I think we ought to be careful here in terms of cause and effect relating to Syria.

In Egypt and Saudi Arabia, one can argue that there is domestic pressure for reform, and both of these governments are responding to it. But you can also argue that these governments responded in part to pressure from the United States. They believe that they had to; that the United States is making this a priority; that the president of the United States needs to show some results – for political reasons at least.

I don't think these governments believe that the Bush administration is advocating democracy as an end in itself. They believe that the administration is using it to get strategic cooperation from them and to claim political credit at home. Each one of them has given the administration enough to claim political credit. The problem for the administration will be that once they have moved a country from the negative to the positive side of the ledger, their hands are tied. It's very hard politically to move it back.

We've seen this with Libya. It was claimed that they no longer had weapons of mass destruction. Now Libya is on the positive side of the ledger, regardless of its authoritarianism. The minute you move it back, you lose ground politically in the United States. So now our hands are tied and we have a problem.

Whatever the intent of the advocacy for democracy, I think it opens up space. It takes away the Tiananmen Square option for governments in the Middle East, and that allows people to be more empowered to test the waters. They can take more risks. There is a second impact that most of us haven't thought about enough. It's been profoundly helpful in our own discourse in America. It has overshadowed the "clash of civilizations" thesis. Suddenly Arabs are normal people in the American discourse. There is no barrier of culture or religion; it is just bad governments. We talk about an Arab Spring as we talk about a Prague Spring. This is a helpful discourse in America, and it might in the end even reduce the sharpness of the clash on the other side.



**AMB. FREEMAN:** Thank you, Shibley, particularly for that very important last point. As we look at the issue of democracy or the appearance of democracy or the feigning of democracy in the Arab world, I at least am reminded of the scene in *The Wizard of Oz*, where there is a little man off to the side manipulating the whole thing, trying not to be noticed. I wonder sometimes when I talk to people out there how real all this is and how much is a shadow play for the benefit of an audience over here. Just as you suggested, some of what we do on our side is probably more directed at feeling good about ourselves than it is actually doing anything in the region.

**SAAD EDDIN IBRAHIM, professor of political sociology, University of Cairo;  
chairman, Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies**

Based on my experience, I feel good about what is happening in the region. Two years ago I was in a courtroom pending trial for my advocacy of democracy – my third trial. It could have sealed two previous trials condemning me to seven years in prison. The fact that the Egyptian high court reversed the previous rulings and acquitted me and my colleagues felt very good. It made me think that maybe our fight for democracy in Egypt and the Arab world is not in vain.

True, one day after my acquittal, the Iraq War broke out. I was opposed to the war. However, as a social scientist, I couldn't help but entertain the notion that, awful as it was, the war may have some unintended consequences that are positive for the region. That is not a very popular intellectual position nowadays, but I'm telling you my honest feeling when the war broke out.

When I was in prison, I wrote a letter to Saddam Hussein pleading with him to step down voluntarily to avert the war. Of course, he didn't listen to me. Nor did President Bush in my plea to roll back preparations for the war. Whatever happened, happened. Today we have real signs of advances toward liberation, toward freedom, toward democracy. Is it a mirage? No, definitely not. Thousands of people descended into the streets of Beirut in defiance of Syrian occupation to demonstrate and demand sovereignty and an end to Syrian occupation after nearly 30 years. These are the middle-class kids that we as social scientists always thought would never really amount to anything – very indifferent, self-absorbed in their pleasures, and so on. But all of a sudden, a middle-class group from all sects of Lebanon – of course triggered by the tragic assassination of Rafik Hariri – stood up and said, we want to reclaim our country.

Eight-and-a-half million Iraqis, despite terrorism, violence and threats, and despite their hatred of occupation, went out and voted very proudly. The footage you have all seen on television tells us that there is something real there, something that could not have happened only three or four years ago.

Then you have Palestine. You have the Saudi election. You have demonstrations in Egypt demanding free and honest elections and a change of the constitution, saying “no more” to Mubarak. Raising that very interesting slogan that many of you probably have learned by now, *kifaya*, “enough.” That very word will probably enter all the European languages as the second-best-known word in Arabic after *intifada*.

In Egypt, it was *kifaya* to Mubarak's 24 years of autocratic rule, the third longest in



Egypt's 6,000-year history, the first being Ramases II, followed by Muhammed Ali, who ruled for 40 years. For Egyptians to demonstrate, even in small numbers, is to break the fear barrier. They have continued to do so now for three months, small groups here and there. The Muslim Brothers demonstrate, the leftists demonstrate, the Nasserites demonstrate. The judiciary in Egypt is even rising up in defiance, wanting to restore its own independence.

The changes that we see in the Middle East, in the Arab world, are real. They may not amount to a spring yet, but they are not a mirage. The long winter is definitely over. But problems are building. Marina mentioned some of them; Jillian mentioned others. Shibley mentioned the overall context in which the Arabs are perceiving what is happening to them and looking at the outside and the role of the outside. And these are precisely the three issues that I'd like to conclude with.

Are the civil-society forces, the democratic groups in different countries in the Middle East, ready to take over from the autocratic regimes? The answer to the question varies from one country to another. In some countries, I think they are ready. In Lebanon, for example, a country that has a long experience with democracy and pluralism. I think they are ready in Egypt. I think they are ready in Iraq. Definitely in Palestine. Saudi Arabia, I'm not so sure about. Nor Libya. Nor Tunisia.

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The second question has to do with the role of the Islamists in this overall scheme of democratic government. Should they be allowed in? What do we anticipate? Speaking as an activist more than an ideologue, I say Islamists on principle and on pragmatic grounds must be included in any democratic transformation of the region. They are substantial, they are there on the ground, they are disciplined, they are committed. They have been performing very important social services for the poor and the needy, and they have managed to project an image of a corruption-free political force in contrast to regimes that are plagued by corruption. They have substantial constituencies, and they have to be included in any scheme for governance.

The third point is the role of the foreign power. The chair mentioned that the Bush administration likes to take credit for everything positive that's happening in the Middle East. That is very troubling. Whenever I'm asked how much they deserve in the way of credit, the best I could think of is as much credit as a midwife. Bush is not responsible for the pregnancy, but he may be credited with the delivery. People have been fighting for democracy for years. People have gone to prison for years. People have died for years. For Bush to come in at the very end and claim credit for all of that is an overstatement. But the outside world can help us to continue our march toward democracy. The only thing we ask is not to send armies, guns, tanks and planes. Just stop supporting dictators.



It was autocracy in the Arab world that fed the theocracy in the Middle East. Between the autocrats and the theocrats, we have been beleaguered for a long time, but now may be the moment for the democrats.

**AMB. FREEMAN:** One question that occurred to me as Saad Eddin was speaking was whether his very sophisticated construct of democracy is what other people in the region are talking about. The power of the common man versus the autocrat is one thing, and a commitment to limited government under procedures of law and to participation in decision making on a mass level is another. Marina noted that, in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia, the result of the municipal council elections was to bring Shia elements into office. In the Nejd, in central Saudi Arabia, it apparently brought Wahhabi extremists into office, and it's just resulted in some people being killed in Mecca as the election proceeded. I don't know what the result is there, but it raises a question of whether elections in Saudi Arabia are not a mechanism for the redefinition of politics from its traditional tribal base to an ideological base. Whether that's a good thing is not clear to me.

#### Q&A

**Q:** I worry that the leading advocates of democracy here in Washington are among the people who are most vociferously opposed to the Israel-Palestine peace process. And I wonder whether there's been a bait-and-switch pulled off by people like Elliot Abrams and Natan Sharansky, who has been touted around Washington as the democracy and anti-tyranny guru. It strikes me that the best way to fuel these various processes that the panelists have talked about would be a fundamental breakthrough on the Israel-Palestine peace process and the establishment of a genuine two-state solution. And so I worry that the people most opposed to this seem to be the most vocal advocates of forcing democracy down the throats of regimes in the Middle East.

**DR. TELHAMI:** I don't know what motivates most people who advocate democracy in the Middle East. I suspect that, in Washington and around the Bush administration, there are very differing motivations by different people. Clearly, there is an assumption that the president himself is behind this notion of spreading democracy. He accepted the notion and made it the primary issue in his second-term inaugural speech. I don't suspect that he himself is advancing it as a way of avoiding the Arab-Israeli issue. Perhaps he doesn't believe the Arab-Israeli issue is a top priority as much as I do or some other analysts do, but there probably are other motives.

There's always the danger – and I think we've seen this in the Iraq War – that by highlighting one problem it takes away from a core problem like the Arab-Israeli issue. And you can argue that a lot of Arabs' opposition to the Iraq War – including hesitation by governments initially – was tied to the notion that the administration should have spent the capital that came out of 9/11 to resolve the Arab-Israeli issue. You can argue that that was a legitimate position to take, but you don't want to argue that, because there's the Arab-Israeli issue, the advocacy of democracy is not legitimate. The problem in the region, and it's an indigenous problem, is not to allow the Arab-Israeli issue to be an obstacle to the pursuit of democracy.



The view of the United States in the Arab world is in large part formed through the painful prism of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The notion that the United States is bolstering authoritarianism is important, but even the authoritarian issue is connected in the public mind in the Arab world to the Arab-Israeli issue. The United States is thought to be making deals with governments that are helpful in postponing a solution to the Arab-Israeli issue. So the public sees the two as connected. I don't think that the view of the United States in the Middle East will significantly improve so long as there is bloodshed in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

**AMB. FREEMAN:** The question is a serious one. For a long time, while Mr. Arafat was alive, it appeared that the White House and Mr. Sharon were busily redefining land for peace into Palestinian democratization for Israeli tolerance of the Palestinian leadership. Land for peace became reform for coexistence or something like that. I think that was an evasion deliberately directed at outlasting Yasser Arafat. Whether the president continues to have that set of priorities is an open question, one touching all the issues throughout the region that we're discussing.

**DR. IBRAHIM:** For a long time, the demand for democracy and for opening up the political system was said to have to wait until the Arab-Israeli conflict was resolved. As we all know, the conflict is almost into its sixtieth year. God knows when it will be resolved or whether it will be resolved to the satisfaction of the autocrats who are out of work. But it has been used cynically to postpone reform. Even our Palestinian colleagues, Hanan Ashrawi and others, made the very brave statement last summer that they don't want Arab rulers to use Palestinians as an excuse to postpone democracy in their countries. If they have other reasons to postpone it, they can state them. When our foreign minister was here two months ago, every time the media brought up the question of Ayman Nour, one of our opposition leaders who was being detained, he wanted to talk about the Arab-Israeli conflict and the role of Egypt in bringing the parties to Sharm el Sheikh three times.

**Q:** There's one charge which is always repeated in the Arab press: that anybody who takes foreign ideas or meets with American officials about democracy is not authentic. How can any Arab democrat talk with the Americans without losing his influence with his own people?

**DR. TELHAMI:** There is some truth to that, of course, particularly at times when there is strong hostility to the United States and particularly during the Iraq War. People like Saad in Egypt had a tough time during the Iraq War. There were many people who were advocating democracy, and the fact that the United States laid claim to that issue at a time when it was very unpopular made it more difficult.



There is an international role, and it is important. When there is momentum for change, when people start challenging the paradigm, things can change. So, in the short term, it's a barrier. But the question that is open is whether there is a trend of empowerment, that these people are going to have to get some source of power. Whether you like it or not, international pressure did result in part in the release of Saad Eddin Ibrahim. Of course, it was a legal issue as well, but in the end, I think one can make an argument that there was a connection and that that connection has consequences for others, including those who don't want to be directly associated with the United States.

**DR. OTTAWAY:** Certainly that problem does exist, but part of the solution, I think, is for more and more people advocating reform in the Arab world to seek contact with the United States, even if they don't agree on a lot of issues. We all need to get over the idea that talking to somebody means agreeing with what they have to say. The United States has to talk to the Islamist movements, but that does not mean having to agree with them. The people who are advocating reform have to talk to the United States and to Europeans, even if they don't agree on a lot of points.

**DR. SCHWEDLER:** In my experience – and I've been told anecdotes by others – the worst thing you can do for an opposition movement is either to have the government or the United States endorse it. This just destroys it. But I think a lot of it is tied up in Shibley's first comments. It's not contact with the West or the United States it's suspicion about true U.S. intentions. So if you're working with U.S. agents or talking to representatives from the United States who are not really interested in promoting democracy, then it's clearly problematic. I think if the United States is able to reshape its image and demonstrate somehow that it really is, in fact, pushing this forward, the public's fear will evaporate very quickly.

**AMB. FREEMAN:** It seems to me that there is a very interesting phenomenon internationally which the Japanese call "gaiatsu," meaning foreign pressure. Governments typically welcome foreign pressure from friendly countries when they want to do something but don't have the courage to do it on their own. So they can do what must be done in their own interests and blame it on the foreigners who put pressure on them. But this only works when the foreigners are seen to be well-intentioned. Unfortunately, at the moment, the United States is not seen in the region as well-intentioned. The irony is that many of the advocates of democracy in the region, were they to come to power, would not accommodate the United States as the autocrats have done on issues like Iraq, but would act as the Turkish Parliament did, refusing cooperation rather than offering clandestine collaboration, as most of the autocrats did in the invasion of Iraq.

**DR. IBRAHIM:** I don't have a dilemma. My agenda's fairly clear: I am fighting for democracy. I don't care what my detractors – autocrats – say. If you are going to condition your behavior on what your enemies are saying, you're not going to be serving your cause. So the moral clarity is very important when it comes to issues like this.

**Q:** What is the role of the media in shaping Arab opinion in this country or around the world? Second, is the Arab media moving away from just simple anti-Americanism toward democracy promotion?



**DR. TELHAMI:** I'm glad you asked that question because it gives me a chance to plug my forthcoming book, *Reflections of Hearts and Minds: Media Opinion and Identity in the Arab World*. Most of the public-opinion polls that I've been doing were intended to see whether there's a relationship between what people watch in the media and their opinions, but also how political identity is affected by the media.

I can tell you one central finding. There is no statistically significant relationship between what people watch on television and their attitudes toward the United States. You can say what you want about the media, and some are better than others in the Middle East, but aggregately it's far better than it was a decade ago. But the attitudes toward the United States are not a function of the media. I think I show that very clearly both in terms of what I measured statistically in the context of public-opinion polling, but also by going outside the Middle East to control it, to find out whether my findings are correct. I think I make a very persuasive case that there is no relationship in general.

People have what I've called issues of core identity, predispositions based on a host of issues related to policy – sense of self, historical trends – and they generally go to the media that reflect their opinions on those issues. The media affects you on matters that you don't care as much about or don't know as much about, but if you have pre-formed views on issues that are related to your core identity, you are going to watch the media that reflects your view.

In America, if you are a strong Democrat in the heat of an election, and you watch a television story that is negative toward the Democrats, you don't say, I'm going to vote for the Republicans. You say it's a biased station. This happens on every single issue that people care about. So I think there is a huge exaggeration of the relationship between Arab media and public opinion, particularly on attitudes toward the United States. It's an excuse for poor policy, and we shouldn't allow it to detract from the debate on this issue.

Second, I think there's a misunderstanding about where the media does have an impact. If you look at the Middle Eastern media today and ask what's different from ten years ago, it is now market driven – not financially driven, but viewership driven. Therefore, it's putting out what people want to see by virtue of the competitive market. People have choices. When they show things that we consider “militant,” such as bloodshed in the West Bank and Gaza, which we think incites people, that's a function of the political state of affairs. Al Jazeera Television is now accused of being part of the anti-American machine. We forget, first of all, that it's sponsored by one of the most pro-American governments in the region which is hosting American forces on its soil. We also forget that, in the late-1990s, al-Jazeera was accused of being an American agent and “an Israeli agent” because it was seen to be normalizing Israel in the Arab world. It was the first one to put the Israel issue on in a big way, having an al-Jazeera representative in the West Bank and the Knesset and covering Israel in a normal fashion. That's what the public wanted. Today, when we have demonstrations in Beirut that we want to be empowering and inspiring, al-Jazeera is there to cover it, or al-Arabiya or any of the satellite television networks.

The public is not responding to the media; they're responding to the event. The media now conveys the event, whether it's positive or negative. The fact that you have Abu



Ghraib prison coverage is not the troubling part to me. What's troubling is that the Abu Ghraib scandal took place. And, frankly, as a citizen, when something like that happens, I want to see it. There is a lot of criticism of the media's covering bloodshed in the war. I don't think wars should be shown as sterile. They are horrible; they are painful; they are troubling.

**DR. OTTAWAY:** Polls done to measure international public opinion on this issue show exactly the same thing that Shibley was talking about concerning Arabs. There are very clear differences of views on international issues such as war in Iraq, between people who watch Fox News and people who watch *The NewsHour* on PBS. But that is not because their ideas are shaped by those channels. It's more because people who have one view go to certain stations, and people who have another view go to different ones. I have been on the *Washington Journal* on C-Span several times. They have two call-in lines, one if you are a Bush supporter and another if you are a Democrat. It's quite clear from the questions asked that people have access to very different sources of information, that the factual bases of their questions are totally opposite.

**Q:** The authority of the new Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, is being challenged in various ways, to the point that one could almost say it's being threatened. In addition, there's another election coming up for the head of Fatah, and it's not clear that Abbas is necessarily going to win. If he doesn't, for the first time, those two roles would be separated. They were combined in Yasser Arafat. That would also undercut his authority. How viable is the

Palestinian democracy?

And how viable is Mahmoud Abbas in his present role?

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**With Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, the gap of expectations on what follows is so large between the Palestinians and the Israelis that they are headed for a clash.**

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**DR. TELHAMI:** If you look at the Palestinian agenda – that is, what the public wants – two issues have risen to the top. First, they

want to see relief and change and the promise of a real state and an end of Israeli occupation. The second is the corruption issue. It's become hugely important, particularly in connection with Fatah. Most of the analysts who saw the results in Gaza, in which Hamas made some significant gains locally, connect those gains with the issue of corruption far more than with a philosophical shift toward Hamas within the Palestinian areas.

The challenge for Abu Mazen was always how quickly he can deliver on these two things. The problem is that he's entirely dependent on those two – in part on Israel, and in part on the very institutions that he needs to reform. If he's going to reform the security services, he needs them because he's only one man. If he's going to reform the Fatah bureaucracy, he needs them. If he's going to reform the Legislative Council, he needs them. The question is, can he use the popular sentiment that is so strongly in favor of reform to take a populist approach, to do some high-level things in relation to fighting corruption – and take risks, therefore, with his own constituency, and perhaps take a



chance that he could score better in the upcoming elections in the West Bank? Or should he play it safe? So far, he's been playing it safe. That has helped in the short term, but it is potentially consequential for both the local elections and the legislative elections in the West Bank. Hamas has a good chance of winning some of these elections or increasing its power. And that's going to tie his hands.

Even if he rides through this, he will be weakened. With Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, the gap of expectations on what follows is so large between the Palestinians and the Israelis that they are headed for a clash. I don't think we've prepared for it here in the United States. And I don't think Abu Mazen is going to be strong enough to deal with that gap of expectations.

**AMB. FREEMAN:** I think it would be fair to address Saad Eddin's third factor, which is the role of external powers in this regard. How much difference does it make what stand the United States or the EU takes, or how much aid goes into the Palestinian Authority?

**DR. TELHAMI:** From the U.S. point of view, there are two things that are extremely important. One is helping the Palestinian Authority in the short term, both economically and politically, to reform and stabilize in both the security and the economic arenas. That can only be done if the president of the United States makes this a priority. We saw it when the president in his speech offered significant aid to the Palestinian Authority after the election. Very quickly, some important members of Congress raised questions about it. The president can only succeed if this is a priority issue for him, because it's going to come at some expense.

At the level of politics, the role of the United States is going to be indispensable in assuring the Palestinians about final status. The Israelis are not going to put out more detail about their notion of final status, and according to the Roadmap, they're not obligated to do so at this stage. They're still not violating the Roadmap on that score. So, since the president gave assurances to the Israelis about some parameters for final settlement prior to the election, it is extremely important for him to provide some parameters on the Palestinian side about the American notion of final status – as an assurance. The biggest worry for the Palestinians is the final-status issue, particularly if there is a postponement, which is what the Israelis want. Conventional wisdom in Israel is “let's get through this, find some security, then begin negotiations.” Many people are very comfortable delaying the final settlement to the next generation. I don't think that is the Palestinian position. This is where the United States can help.

**Q:** I have a question to Saad Eddin Ibrahim. There are always accusations that you are connected to outsiders and receive money from external government sources to promote democracy. What is your comment on that?

**DR. IBRAHIM:** The accusation is correct. And so long as Mubarak receives money, every civil-society organization in Egypt and in the Arab world is entitled to receive help from the outside. We don't hide this. We are very transparent about it. We say, when our rulers stop dealing with outsiders, we will also stop dealing with outsiders.

On the Palestinian question, I think it would be healthy for everybody to deal with Hamas in the West Bank. It may also be healthy for the Palestinian evolution to democ-



racy and good governance to engage Hamas in the democratic process. I'm heartened by the fact that they are going to compete in the next election. This is part of what democracy is all about. This is, ultimately, what would make Hamas come to the table and be prepared to deal with the Israelis and the Americans.

**Q:** Having spent most of my life in the Middle East, I know that the U.S. policy right now of democracy promotion has very little credibility. Second, some Arab states or Middle East countries are more ready for democracy than others and definitely need help. What would be the right adjustments to U.S. policy in promoting democracy in the Middle East?

**DR. OTTAWAY:** I agree with what the other members of the panel said, that assistance to groups that are seeking to promote change is important. The question is how it is done. It is very dangerous when the model that the United States has in mind is essentially the Eastern European model. You support dissidents; you single out certain people who sort of incarnate the view of democracy, and so on.

I think this is not the right approach in the Middle East. First of all, you have a much more open political situation. I'm not trying to imply that there are no problems with freedom of expression and so on, but compared to the Soviet Union, for example, you certainly have a much more open political situation. There is more access to information, more possibility of speaking out, and so on.

What is missing in the Middle East is organization. It's not just individual people but organizations that embrace certain ideas. It would be very important for emphasis to shift from specific individuals to assisting dialogue among organizations. The first way to do that would be for the United States to start engaging itself in that activity. Democracy is not going to come to the Middle East, I am convinced, until the Islamists and the liberal reformers start talking to each other much more than they are doing now. One way to promote that is for the United States itself to start broadening the range of interlocutors with whom it is willing to talk.

**DR. SCHWEDLER:** I agree completely. The United States needs to be consistent in speaking out against anti-democratic moves that happen in a country. I want to ask Saad to comment on this because he has an interesting contrary view, and we've had this conversation before. The project I'm working on now has to do with protest and policing, and a lot of people, after they've gotten out of prison, have complained to me, where was United States? We were arrested simply for critiquing the prime minister or something, and where was the United States? Where were the Western voices saying, why are you imprisoning Toujan Faisal for these completely spurious reasons – as an example in Jordan? The U.S. consistently speaking out on that would go a long way toward building credibility. But that's not necessarily helpful to the people in prison. So there's a little tension there.

**DR. IBRAHIM:** When you are in prison, you welcome any help, whether it comes from China, Japan or the United States. There are three prisoners now in Saudi Arabia, all on charges of *fitnah* – sedition. The punishment for that crime is beheading. There were initially 12 of them; nine have agreed to compromise and to implicitly apologize for having criticized the Saudi royal family. The other three persisted, and as a result they are still in



prison. They are entering into their third year. Western governments have not really spoken. Amnesty International has. Human Rights Watch has. Many human-rights organizations have spoken on behalf of them but not Western governments, and that is inconsistent. As human-rights defenders, as democracy advocates, we would welcome any support we can get. We only hope that this support will be consistent and multilateral. We should not have to explain why I was defended and the 18,000 Islamists imprisoned with me were not. The best I could say is that, rightly or wrongly, I am perceived as sharing some of the universal values that Western democracies uphold. That's why they are defending me and not you. But that was a very painful way of explaining it.

**DR. TELHAMI:** Consistency is central because the credibility issue is very important there. So is setting priorities. When you say we are advocating democracy, that's too big an issue. We don't even know what that means. Even people who truly work on it have differing views of it. Human rights, as such, should be the top priority of advocacy, in part because I think it's an issue over which there are international agreements, not just an American preference. There is a body of literature; there are international rulings and agreements. Obviously that does have consequences for the type of political system and how to empower the public.

But you have to start somewhere, and I would start on human rights very directly. There is even more room for maneuvering with governments whose help

we absolutely need, including outside the Middle East. For example, Pakistan, where the United States needs the help of General Musharaf in the war on al-Qaeda. That's a strategic interest. Those sorts of trade-offs of national-security interests versus human rights or democracy are always there for U.S. foreign policy, but the public in the region understands them at some level. If we had a bit more honesty about this, it would probably be better. But on the human-rights issue, even in Pakistan there's much room for pressing without undermining strategic interests.

When I look at the credibility issue over the past four or five years and ask what has been the most important transformation in public opinion in the Arab and Muslim countries toward the United States, it is not just that more people have an unfavorable view of American foreign policy. In the 1980s and 1990s, most people in the Arab world had an unfavorable view of American foreign policy. Maybe it's more intense now, but it's not a profound change.

The change has been the collapse of confidence, the collapse of credibility. In the spring of 2000, there was a State Department survey in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab

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**Elections that take place very early in the process of democratic transformation are not necessarily a good thing. . . . People in early elections tend to vote their identities. To put the emphasis, in the process of transformation, on having elections as soon as possible is a very serious mistake.**

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Emirates asking people whether they had confidence in the United States of America. This is an interesting measure: confidence. Not whether they liked American foreign policy. Over 60 percent of the public expressed confidence in the United States of America. Right now, it's in the single digits.

Whether you agree or disagree on a subject, if people first of all believe or understand what you are doing, they can deal with it – find a way to have a relationship, to bargain, negotiate, take it into account. When people believed that American policy in the Gulf was mostly motivated by oil, they didn't like that, but it was something they understood. When people started believing the United States was aiming to weaken the Muslim world, they can't negotiate that. The notion of confidence and credibility is very, very important to the effectiveness of American foreign policy. It starts with some degree of honesty with ourselves about what we can and cannot do. The case of Tunisia is enlightening because, while you can make a case that Saudi Arabia or Pakistan is strategically important, Tunisia, a country friendly to the United States, has been a very difficult environment for human rights and reform. But there is no obvious strategic reason for it, and that's what the public in the Arab world sees.

**AMB. FREEMAN:** This leads into the issue that I posed at the beginning: the difference between elections and democracy and the question of being honest with ourselves about what is or is not happening in that regard in the region.

**DR. OTTAWAY:** Yes. Shibley's talking about the importance of prioritizing human rights is very good. Unfortunately, lately we have been prioritizing elections. There has been a tendency to confuse elections and democracy. Certainly, you cannot have democracy without elections. The question is, at what point do elections become really crucial as the best means to promote democracy? I think we are regressing on that point. In the '90s, we in the international community trying to help in the processes of democratic transformation learned that elections that take place very early in the process of democratic transformation are not necessarily a good thing. Elections require a certain degree of consensus before they can be successful. The example that everybody cites now is the insistence by the United States and the OSCE [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe] – everybody carries responsibility for this – to have elections in Bosnia as soon as possible after the signing of the Dayton agreement. This was a major mistake. All the elections did was confirm the power of the extreme nationalist movements, essentially. People in early elections tend to vote their identities. To put the emphasis, in the process of transformation, on having elections as soon as possible is a very serious mistake.

There are situations in which it cannot be avoided. There are elections scheduled in Lebanon, and the last thing the United States should say is that those elections should be postponed. The same is true in Palestine. But, those elections in Lebanon are going to be extremely dangerous, because they are going to take place in a situation where there has been a big change – the removal of Syria – but there has not been enough time for the various parties to build up any consensus on where that country is really going. We have to think very carefully about what it is that we are prioritizing, and human rights is a very good place to start, rather than the election process.

**DR. SCHWEDLER:** I think human rights absolutely must be at the top, not just because



human rights are a value in and of themselves, but because deep democratic practice entails norms about the right to have different voices heard. The new media are playing a really important role in that regard, particularly al-Jazeera, but others as well. This shows that it's good to have different voices in a forum talking to each other, presenting views; that it's a legitimate and appropriate mechanism for bringing forth different ideas. As that happens more and more, it bodes very well for the prospects of democracy, connected with the different types of engagements among actors that have no contact with each other.

This sort of thickening of these types of democratic practices is extremely important, and the emphasis on human rights provides a framework within which that can emerge. Without that emphasis, you're going to have – as in Jordan and many other cases – a shutting down. Three

people can't meet; you need to get a permit now. Essentially all dimensions of civil society have moved into the professional associations. But to have a meeting in the professional association's building, the association itself has to get a permit. So there is almost no sphere for pluralist

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**In the short term, what you're likely to have whenever you have transformations from authoritarianism to democracy are periods of high instability. This results from both economic dislocation and the fear that emanates from disintegration of social or political structures.**

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debate, discussion, activities, alliances. But we still have elections as a sort of political performance every four years, but it's very thin. Having said that, elections are incredibly important. They create the structural opportunity for these groups to come together to push agendas in parliaments, et cetera. We don't want to say, take elections off the menu of priorities. But highlighting human rights is an incredibly important means to get to richer activities.

**DR. IBRAHIM:** I don't know why you have to put priority on human right over elections. Couldn't you have both? If you have to err, err on the side of elections. I say this as an activist for democracy. I do not want to postpone elections under the pretext that autocrats have always used. Mubarak has a famous phrase: the only problem with a free election is that you cannot predict the outcome. This is true. An autocrat would welcome any pretext to postpone an election: we don't have enough people who are educated; we don't have enough people who are well-off; poverty; the election could be bought; it will foment sectarianism.

Having monitored elections, having participated in elections, being an advocate of elections, I say, no matter what the negative fall out, it is still far better than autocracy.

**Q:** Obviously, there's extreme poverty in Palestine, an income gap in Egypt, and so on. Is it not important in terms of democracy to have in place a very effective economic policy so that you don't go through the tremendous disillusionment that occurred in Eastern



Europe, Russia and many other places?

**DR. TELHAMI:** As I said, in my statistical findings there is no apparent relationship between what people watch and their views of the United States. When we mined the data to see what variables mattered most, not only on attitudes toward the United States, but also on other issues, we found that two were the most critical: income and education. On attitudes toward the United States, the less income you have, the more resentful you are of the United States. In some instances, the better educated you are, the more resentful you are of the United States. The most difficult combination for the United States was being educated and unemployed. We were measuring people who may have a B.A. in some area like Arab history and been out for four or five years but have no job, no skills and low income, but they show up as “educated.”

I would suggest that these factors are probably much more related to the question of militancy than democracy. This is related to the notion of why the United States is advocating democracy, and the confidence that people now have in the current way of advocating democracy, as opposed to the late 1980s. Chas. Freeman was in the first Bush administration, which, just before Iraq invaded Kuwait, had decided to make democracy an issue. That’s when we had a lot of change in the Middle East.

When Clinton first came into office, before the Oslo agreement, he highlighted democracy. They were backtracking. People here have more confidence in this wave of American advocacy for one reason only: American elites have come to believe, rightly or wrongly, that the advocacy of democracy is connected with American national security; that terrorism against America emanated from the absence of democracy in Arab and Muslim countries; and that the more democracy, the less terrorism.

This is not a hypothesis on which there is sweeping agreement among scholars. There is counterargument in the literature about whether it’s true. You can make a very strong argument that, in the short term, what you’re likely to have whenever you have transformations from authoritarianism to democracy are periods of high instability. This results from both economic dislocation and the fear that emanates from disintegration of social or political structures, which could even result in backtracking in some instances and certainly could result in more militancy, as we’ve seen in Iraq and other places.

When you asked people in the Arab world in 2004 whether they believed that Iraqis are better off, they looked at how Iraqis are living their lives – the absence of security, the economic difficulties. Democracy is a worthy cause. The American advocacy of democracy is a good thing. But I worry that there’s likely to be backtracking. I would, therefore, reorient our attention in part toward the economic and educational issues, because I see those far more connected to militancy than the issue of political structures as such.

**AMB. FREEMAN:** This is a case of many countries with vast differences among them. The per-capita income in Qatar, which is measured in the hundreds of thousands of dollars per family, contrasts with Mauritania at the other end of the Arab world, where it’s perhaps less than \$100. So we’re talking about a region of unbelievable diversity in the economic sphere as well as in many other spheres. This ought to be a caution to us against cookie-cutter approaches to the various issues we’ve been discussing.

**DR. OTTAWAY:** I totally agree. We have seen all over the world that lack of economic



progress in the context of the democratic transition is, in fact, very dangerous. It can undermine confidence in democracy. We are beginning to see it, for example, in some Latin American countries, where the increased levels of poverty in the last 10 years are, in fact, beginning to lead to a backlash. But I'd like to turn my attention briefly to another aspect of this relationship between economic conditions and democracy. And that is the issue that Chas. mentioned earlier about the prospects for democracy in oil-producing countries. There is no doubt that countries that are rentier states, where the government is totally dependent on oil revenue and therefore not dependent on its citizens because it does not have to tax in order to have an income, have a much greater problem in turning to democracy.

There are very few major oil-producing countries that were not democratic before oil was discovered that have become democratic. And that is something of great concern for Saudi Arabia and the other countries in the Gulf.

**AMB. FREEMAN:** Mr. Putin in Russia, too.

**DR. OTTAWAY:** And for Mr. Putin, yes. We really don't have any good solutions. There are attempts underway, for example, to try and help citizens of these oil-producing countries access more information about how much oil revenue that country really gets so that there can be some accountability on how money is spent. There are various transparency initiatives that are being developed around the world. The British government has taken a major role in this. The U.S. government has kept away from it, arguing that all initiatives have to be purely voluntary. But essentially the goal of these initiatives is to try and get the oil companies and the governments of the oil-producing countries to disclose the amount of oil revenue that is on the table. It's one of the few steps that can be usefully taken, but this is an issue of great concern.

**AMB. FREEMAN:** One of the few truly constructive notions that emerged from the ill-fated CPA in Iraq in its earliest stage was the notion of giving all Iraqi citizens direct access to oil income through dividends and then taxing them on the dividends. That would have provided an answer to this problem. And there are some experiments going on elsewhere in the region – in Qatar, for example, with the distribution of national wealth directly to citizens that could, in time, should the Qataris wish to do it, lead to that kind of organic relationship between the citizens and the government. But this has yet to emerge in practice.

**Q:** The media in the Middle East is much more pluralistic, particularly with al-Jazeera and the different outlets, but how are the more autocratic regimes treating the Salman Rushdies of today? How easy is it for a young novelist to produce a book?

**AMB. FREEMAN:** Saad Eddin, I'd like to hear your comment on this. You were just as outspoken in Egypt as you have been here. And that got you into a bit of trouble, but you're here.

**DR. IBRAHIM:** It does get you in trouble if you speak your mind. That is the difficulty of being an intellectual. When you speak truth to power, there are dangers. In one of the prisons where I was, there were several authors who were there because they were considered blasphemous. Their writings were considered heretical. The penalty in Egypt is



three years when you engage in this kind of writing. Who decides what is heretical? There are two sources in Egypt. One is the Islamic University al-Azhar. It has an Islamic Research Council, which can determine that a given writing is heretical. There is also public opinion. Zealots can raise questions about a given writer even if al-Azhar had not declared him heretical. I have in mind the case of somebody like Rushdie in Egypt, Nasr Hamid Abu Said. His case is very famous in our part of the world and in Europe. What the zealots did was to declare his writing on the Quran – a fresh perspective on our holy book – to be heretical. He was taken to court and the first level condemned him, saying that as a heretic he should not be married to a Muslim woman. The ruling was to separate him from his wife, even though she loved him and wanted to continue living with him. She did not ask for a divorce because of his heresy. The government was at a loss what to do, especially when that first-level ruling was confirmed in an appeals court.

Appeal rulings must be implemented by the government. The government didn't want to implement it, so he was encouraged to flee the country. He took refuge in Holland, where he is still living. He's been there for 10 years and cannot come back to Egypt without risking separation from his wife, who is also a professor of French literature. So intolerance is not just on the part of the regime, but sometimes on the level of extreme groups who, under the guise of Islam, can harass writers.

**DR. SCHWEDLER:** I think in the case I know best, the climate for dissenting voices is atrocious at the moment. I mentioned earlier Toujan Faisal, a former parliamentarian and a secular reformer, who published an open letter on the internet, not even in Jordan, that questioned the prime minister's abuse of temporary laws. When the parliament is not in session, these were supposed to be used only for issues of national security. She questioned why insurance rates were doubled via a temporary law, and she was imprisoned for it. She spent over a month in prison before her sentence was suspended. She still has a misdemeanor on her record, so she is not eligible to run for parliament anymore.

Several other people – Hisham Bustani, Ibrahim Alloush and many others – have been arrested for publishing critiques, questions about policing, critiques of the government, critiques of foreign policy in Al Adab Online, which is based in Beirut. This is dissent even from Jordanians outside the country, who have ended up in prison later for their efforts. The climate for expressing dissent of any sort is terrible.

**DR. OTTAWAY:** I agree with what both Saad and Jillian have said. There is no doubt that the religious authorities are trying to weigh in more and more and that the space for publishing anything that religious authorities might consider blasphemous is narrowing in a rather dramatic fashion, even in countries where it did not use to be the case.

It is as dangerous as ever to criticize leaders, to criticize specific people. There has been, on the other hand, more space for debate about democracy, about the need for reform as long as it is couched in rather general terms. For example, the Arab press recently has had a lot of discussion on issues of democracy, reform and so on. So there is a little opening there, which I don't think makes up for the closure in all sorts of other important areas. But there is more being discussed in the Arab press today than there was 10 years ago.

**AMB. FREEMAN:** I think this is true even in countries with traditionally closed presses.



There really is, in this respect, a wave of freedom for dialogue going on, but as has been indicated, it is severely limited when it comes up against religion or direct criticism of the authorities in most of these countries.

**Q:** We read in *The Washington Post* recently that the United States is in the process of establishing a center for democracy or democratic education in Yemen. Do you feel it is possible to copy the U.S. model of democracy in the Arab world, from Mauritania to Oman?

**DR. SCHWEDLER:** In terms of copying the model in general, I don't think you can just pick it up and plop it down, and I don't think people are suggesting that. A lot of it needs to be generated from within. You can take aspects of what works. You can look to experiments in federal systems to think about how to deal with an ethnically divided context, for example: what has worked or not worked in the past. But I also reject the idea, which isn't what you're suggesting, that there is nothing that can be borrowed. There are certainly global experiments in democracy, and we can pick and choose what works. And by "we" I mean the societies themselves. It's problematic when people come from the outside and say, "we want to restrain the Shia; therefore, we have to use these types of systems." That's when the problem comes up.

**AMB. FREEMAN:** That seems to me to be the key issue: that it is the borrowers who have to make the decision, not the lenders. I think, with all due modesty, Americans should recall that the annual amount our federal government has budgeted to promote democracy in the entire swath of territory we are talking about, with its 300 million people, is less than the monthly household expenses of some members of the royal family in Saudi Arabia.

**DR. OTTAWAY:** If you look at the activities that have been undertaken in democracy promotion in the last 15 years, you find some very good programs and some very silly ones. There are some universals in democracy, beginning with the idea that government has to be accountable to the citizens. The protection of human rights is very universal, and I'd be very happy to see it applied from Mauritania to wherever. But political systems and procedures should be tailored to the conditions of specific countries. I don't think the American system would work very well in Germany, for example. It's not a question of just the Arab world. The specific decisions on how best to organize a government so that the citizens can hold it accountable really depend on local conditions. We get into trouble when we try to export models when they are too closely tailored on our own.

**AMB. FREEMAN:** Let us recall that American democracy with Asian characteristics exists in the Philippines, where we had 50 years to tutor and convince Filipinos to adopt our beliefs and do things our way. I don't think they actually do things our way very much despite the familiar form of government there. That should give us a bit of modesty.

**Q:** Dr. Telhami, you mentioned that there is a weakening of Arabs in the Middle East. I wonder if you could thicken that point.

**DR. TELHAMI:** The Iraq War has resulted in Shia empowerment, and some people worry about the consequences of that in the context of Iran and Iraq. But I don't think that's really the overriding issue in every aspect of that relationship. The elections in Iraq,



despite all the negative perceptions, have had more of a positive impact on the perception of Iraq. They haven't increased opposition to the Iraq War. There has been a mitigation of that opposition with the elections. Early on, after the Iraq War, there were two overriding factors. People wanted to see the United States fail. They were essentially opposed to American foreign policy, and this was higher than their desire to see Iraq succeed. Because of this adamant opposition to the war, which they saw the United States doing for the wrong reasons, they wanted to see the United States fail. But they also believed early on that most of the opposition was legitimate nationalist opposition to occupation. They were heartened by it. There was a lot of public support for that Iraqi opposition. They saw it as a defiance of occupation.

This now has changed a bit. The face of the insurgency has become Zarqawi and al-Qaeda. I say "the face" because we really don't know the extent to which Zarqawi is conducting these attacks. But he has become the face of the insurgency; there is no other Sunni or Shiite leader that people can associate with a national liberation movement. Zarqawi is not a national liberation movement. Some people may support anything that would hurt the U.S. occupation, but there has been a mitigation of that in their thinking.

Having said all of this, there is a Shiite aspect to this in people's minds. We don't know what Ayatollah Sistani wants. What we do know is that he's played a very important role in preventing Iraq from disintegrating and from having a civil war. He has been constructive from the American point of view in terms of preventing the situation from getting far worse. He probably is the single most important factor in having elections succeed. He's on record for wanting to see Sharia law as a basis of Iraqi politics. Prime Minister Jafari believes that too. They are empowered politically, but they're not empowered in the sense of having control. Even if they, themselves, really want to maintain separation of religion and politics, will the people who follow them do the same? We don't know that. What happens next year if there is a confrontational relationship with Iran? What happens both in terms of Iran's relations in Iraq directly and assets they have that they've not employed. And what will be the position of those significant leaders in Iraq who account for the relative stability that we see? That's an issue that we're not talking about that is profoundly consequential for the Arab world, for the Middle East, for the United States.

**AMB. FREEMAN:** That was a good question to end on. It leads us probably into another session. I will just note that in a previous discussion of the Iraqi issue, Colonel Pat Lang remarked that we did not invade Iraq; we invaded the Iraq of our dreams, a mythical country that we invented. Just so, I think, in many ways, as we look at low-intensity conflict in Iraq now, each of us sees a different war. This is because there are many wars going on. There are territorial seizures by the Kurds. There is resistance by Sunni Arab nationalist elements, whether secular and associated with the Baath, or religiously motivated. There are Shiite efforts to assert authority over the Sunnis, and Sunni efforts to show the Shiites that Sunni Arabs cannot be pushed around or ignored in the new order in Iraq. There is a war of resistance against occupation. There are incipient civil wars going on.

The interesting thing to me is that, traveling in the region, I find considerably less concern now about the implications of a Shia-governed Iraq than in the past. Now the



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## DEMOCRACY: RISING TIDE OR MIRAGE?

concern is mainly about the wonderful training ground Iraq is providing for homegrown jihadi terrorists. Lots of kids out there are learning how to run ambushes and build bombs and coordinate complex military choreography for attacks on government authorities. The concern is that, even as governments in the region, like Saudi Arabia, are winning their domestic wars against terrorists by discrediting their ideas, co-opting them, causing them to defect, or killing them, there is a whole new batch of terrorists being trained at a higher level of competence thanks to the U.S. Army. These people will likely come home and cause trouble in the future. And they are not just from one country; many countries in the Arab world will feel this after-effect of the Iraq War. This seems to me to be the major concern, rather than the empowerment of Shia in Iraq. That empowerment is something that the Arab world is going to have to come to grips with in any event, whether it is more open and democratic or not.