THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN MIDDLE EAST STATES

A Roundtable Discussion

The U.S. Department of State's International Information Programs in Washington D.C., the Public Affairs Office at the U.S. Embassy in Israel, and the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center jointly held an international videoconference seminar focusing on the state of democratic reform in the Middle East on June 7, 2005. In addition to looking at regional trends, this updated transcription also examines U.S. policy on democratization, and whether that policy has indeed undergone significant changes recently.

The purpose of this seminar was not to make policy recommendations or reflect any political agenda, but to present the individual views of several scholars studying the region, thinking out loud in trying to develop their own understanding of these issues.

Brief biographies of the participants can be found at the end of the article. This seminar is part of the GLORIA Center's Experts Forum series.

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Jon Alterman: After huge enthusiasm in the spring of 2005 about a rising tide of Arab democracy, sobriety has set in. Much of that enthusiasm was misplaced to begin with, and it has given way to a more realistic reassessment of conditions and prospects.

If we think back, how much real democratic change was there in January's Palestinian elections? Mahmud Abbas ran against a not very impressive field of almost a dozen candidates. While he won an overwhelming preponderance of the vote, he had no clear challenger and the outcome was never very much in doubt. The results of Iraq's January elections were also a foregone conclusion. In Egypt, I think we all know that President Husni Mubarak will win overwhelmingly even if there is more than one candidate next September. In Lebanon, machine politics and backroom deals have returned, and the mass participatory democracy that people thought they saw being born in the Martyrs' Square demonstrations last February and March has not come to pass.

The central issue is that Arab governments continue to monopolize an incredibly vast space between two radical and isolated political poles. Liberals feel they don't have an alternative to seeking government protection from the anti-government radicals, and the anti-government radicals remain isolated as the governments continue to try to cultivate and co-opt religious opposition figures to more or less supporting government line. The result is a political landscape with largely loyal oppositions and radical fringes lacking significant popular support. Consequently, the Arab governments remain remarkably entrenched, and they continue to put down any real challenge to their authority. The machine politics we have

seen in the Middle East over the last 50 or 60 years continue to dominate.

The U.S. government, for its part, is much better at pressing Arab governments than it is at inspiring Arab publics to take politics in a democratic direction. It has numerous effective tools to address those governments, yet far fewer to address those governments' citizens. Arab governments, by contrast, have a wide range of tools to reach their own people. One way such governments are likely to respond to U.S. efforts to directly inspire Arab citizens is to try, through direct and indirect means, to undermine U.S. popularity and influence in the region. In a battle for Arab hearts and minds, the governments--regardless of how ineffective or repressive they may be--enjoy a home field advantage.

It is not hard to imagine how these governments will respond. They have long used the mass media as an instrument for political mobilization. They have used censorship to help control the political space. They have and will continue to play the nationalist card, and they fan the flames of anti-imperialism. It is true that as information and communications technology spreads, governments will lose some of the main tools they have used to maintain political control over the last half-century or more. It would be wrong, though, to assume that these governments have lost control. It is much more likely that governments will learn to adapt than leave office or be thrust from office over the next 10 or 15 years.

That is not to say that Arab politics will be inert for the next decade or two. It also seems to me there is a coming debate in the Arab world that we've begun to see. This is basically debate about authenticity, which is driven by the mass media. The primary political debate will be one about identity rather than forms of government. What is it to be "authentically Arab," or "authentically Egyptian," and so on? Must one be anti-Western? Must one be Muslim? Must organizations be patriarchal and extensions of the individuals who lead them? Political power is unlikely to change hands in the near term, but the terms of political debate will shift.

Danielle Pletka: I'm a little less pessimistic. I think it is obvious to all of us that there is change happening. What we are seeing in Egypt is in every possible sense of the word to my mind superficial. What we've seen in Lebanon has a little more depth. What happened in Saudi Arabia, with the municipal elections, is the ultimate in the government manipulating an issue in order to appear to the outside world to be addressing an issue while in fact achieving almost nothing toward empowering the people and democratization.

On the other hand, in a place like Kuwait we saw something I think few of us might have expected, which was the government manipulating its own political system towards a democratic end. I think that is an indication that there are going to be lots of different roads to achieving representational government in the Middle East. It is not all going to be coming from the top-down. Some will come from the bottom-up. Some from the outside, but showing that in fact you can achieve things.

The biggest challenge to my mind-- I'm betting to all our minds--is creating the necessary institutions that are the underpinnings of democracy. This is what we don't see in the Palestinian Authority. This is frankly what we don't see in almost any

Middle Eastern country. It is the boring stuff of democratic politics, the boring stuff of economic and political reform. We still embrace a very tempting way of going about bringing reform, which is that we grab onto individuals: To highlight the fact that Mahmud Abbas is not Yasir Arafat or to believe that Rafik Hariri's son is going to be the man who will achieve democracy in Lebanon. But, of course, individuals come and individuals go.

What makes a democracy work? As we all know, it's the institutions that enable a society, a government to survive good individuals and bad. I don't think that for the United States that we are doing enough to think creatively or to help people on the ground in the Middle East actually to develop lasting institutions that are actually accountable.

I think there is also a big problem in the expectations' game. President George W. Bush has been admirably aggressive in talking about liberty and democracy and freedom. These words have real resonance and ought to have resonance for people in the Middle East. But at the same time, they should not be led to believe that there is an instantaneous democracy dividend.

What we need, and the president has begun to do this, is to lay out a road map to get where we are going and know that this process will take more than a couple of years and even necessarily a decade. In affecting the Middle East political system, where we do best is with the crowbar, we open the door. The problem is that we leave all the details in the hands of the dictator. We need to do a better job on helping political parties grow up. The best example of that is in Iraq where I think the United States did an absolutely pathetic job in trying to shatter the existing political structures that grew up under Saddam Hussein. So now we have Shi'a parties, we have Kurdish parties, we have Islamic parties. But we don't have a single party devoted to women's rights or lower tax rate or capitalism or socialism. We have all the foolish ideas that everybody has experimented with but lots of the good ideas cross-cutting ethnic and religious lines don't seem to exist. It is not a simple task to develop that type of grassroots movement and so we need to be part and parcel with doing that. That is the way we can shatter the machine politics that we see in Jordan. Governments will be forced to change.

Change is not about just U.S. foreign policy; it's not even just about facing up to the appeal of Islamist extremism. It's really about accepting that there are insurmountable challenges for the existing governments in the Middle East right now, whether they are a 20-plus percent rate of unemployment or a population with so many under the age of 18 who are not going to have their expectations met by their governments or economy. Everybody recognizes there is an imperative for change but we really do have to get more into the details.

Ned Walker: I find myself agreeing almost completely with you. But you are talking about societies that do not have basis for democracy in place at this point. I also believe that they are moving in that direction so I'm not a pessimist. We put too much stock on elections. It is not a question of whether you win an election or don't win an election or which group is representative. There was an election in southern Lebanon, who won? Hizbollah won. Is that what we want from our democracy? Hamas is taking over Gaza. Is that what we want? These are not necessarily in our interests or in the interests of the region.

You have got to start with the institutionization process first and build toward elections. And that means first and foremost democracies built on a strong middle class. Many societies don't have that in the Middle East. Our society does, Israel does. It is important to recognize that part of your effort has to be devoted to helping those countries develop that middle class--tradesmen, businessmen, labor union people, and so on--that can sustain a democracy.

In addition, most of these societies have very fragile and limited numbers of non-governmental organizations. Civil society really isn't well-entrenched. That's an area we have to push. Hopefully we can help these governments or non-governmental organizations build their abilities to take a part in the process of development. The same thing goes with the courts, legal structure, labor unions, and press. All these are the institutions of democracy that are in formative stages. Many of the signs for change are good but need to be encouraged. They cannot be a made-in-America or made-in-Europe structure. It has to be built from within, so people have a vested interest in moving in that direction.

Will they get to democracy? I believe they will because I think the current structure is incapable of competing in the modern world and this is why countries are beginning to show signs of seeking more representation, a stronger base for the societies and governments in the region.

Barry Rubin: Does what we just heard reflect a shift in the Washington debate and policy discussion to a much more cautious, longer-term, less optimistic view in contrast to what we've often heard over the last two years. Is this really a shift based on experiences in Iraq and with recent elections?

Patrick Clawson: No. This is exactly what you have heard for the last two years. If you look at the statements of Mr. Bush he is extremely clear that this is a generations'-long project. He's always used soaring rhetoric as to the goal, and then saying this process is more likely to be lasting and enduring if it is one that is slow and evolutionary. That indeed is the lesson we learned from the experiences of the former Soviet Union or Eastern Europe; that slow change is more likely to be durable, If you ask for instant change and instant elections in circumstances where countries aren't ready for it, you get the kind of dictatorships we see in Belarus or Turkmenistan. This has to be a long slow process. Bush has been extremely clear about that for several years now.

Jon Alterman: I agree that this isn't a change. Where changes occurred is over a question we haven't delved into: Can one talk about democratization and at the same time talk about consistently marginalizing widely held religious views from political discourse? As American officials and academics think more clearly about what democratization may look like, and they reflect on experiences in Iraq and Lebanon which suggest that religious parties may not be *a priori* people that you have to (or perhaps, can) knock out of the system, we all start to face hard choices.

Danielle Pletka: It is really important that people understand that while there has been a drastic change in U.S. foreign policy since 2001--the most dramatic reversal we've seen

in our recent memory in terms of overall approach to the Middle East–that doesn't mean it should not be an approach tempered by reality. The truth is that what we're going to continue to see the president of the United States kiss the leader of Saudi Arabia. We may not like it and may wish they didn't do it. Unfortunately there are realities on the ground that are always going to act as a brake on our idealism.

Ned Walker: Finally, it is necessary to consider what the administration is actually doing. Look at where the projects are going, where the money is going. They are grassroots, are institution-building projects. I personally would like to see it do more.

Bruce Maddy-Weizman: There appears to be a disconnect between how people in the Middle East understand the distinction between the soaring U.S. rhetoric and the more sober, long-term views on how to pursue democracy in this region, which you folks have articulated quite correctly. The soaring rhetoric is understood to mean that the United States is interested in radical and quick change in this region. It could mean regime change in particular. Of course there is a lot of cynicism about the U.S. program in any case.

The policies when translated on the ground are obviously seen quite differently in this region. Both the governments and publics are trying to parse every single statement which comes out of the United States about reform and the regimes. They are very suspicious about what the United States wants to do, fearing it's going to tip toward a too rapid pace of change. Civil society or opposition groups are very cynical about all this and don't believe the United States is interested in reform. The regimes prefer that very little will happen. Managing these different perceptions and preferences is going to be an ongoing problem for this U.S. effort.

Josuha Teitelbaum: I was very encouraged by what I heard from Washington that this is a long-term process that may take generations. And therefore we have to temper expectations. When politicians speak they seem to create expectations for immediate change. At least that is how I think a lot of people hear it.

Danielle Pletka: I think we all want that. I understand the level of naivete of people new to the process who have energetic expectations, and when they hear the president they think democracy now. But his job is to set the goal and define the situation. We need to do a better job on setting expectations. I might like to see existing leaders and ruling families in jail but I don't have a viable alternative to them at the present time.

Jon Alterman: I agree. President Bush is a big idea guy and he is not going to enter into the minutiae of the policy process. Perhaps that is the way it was in the Clinton administration, but it is not the way this president works. He identifies and sets objectives, and he leaves others to achieve them. That is what he is doing on the issue of democratization in the Middle East. The fact he is getting as much attention focused on his goals and on the way he frames the question is a sign of how effective he's been in getting this issue on the agenda.

My complaint is that I think the president thinks that he has an ability to be inspirational beyond the country's borders. In fact, he can't. He is much better at signaling governments. Where he has signaled governments, they have generally pulled

back. In some cases we have seen people tentatively move into the space he helped create to do something, and in others we've seen a vacuum.

Ned Walker: When you look at public opinion polls in the Arab world over the question of why the United States went into Iraq, people say we did so to secure Iraqi oil--which is at a lower production level than in Saddam Hussein's time--or to secure Israel's eastern front. That is what people believe. They don't have any conception of the real reasons we went into Iraq. Now whose fault is that? Part of that fault lays with us, for not doing the educational programs that we need to do, for not doing the kind of what I call real diplomacy. This means an ability to explain motivations, and our desires and wishes to a public which in the broadest sense shares our values, at least according to most of the polls. We are failing on this point more than anything else in trying to do away with this disconnect that you're talking about.

Barry Rubin: My opinion is that, despite what several people have said, that something really has changed in Washington and that perhaps it's related to the experience of Iraq, limited successes elsewhere, and the outcome of several elections. I think there has been a shift as a result of experience, which of course is sensible, being open to learn as a result of events.

Let me put the focus on one relevant issue: the relative success of Islamic or Islamist parties in elections. This is one of the most controversial debates now--will participation in elections and democratic processes moderate such parties. The easy answer is, no, that participation in democratic processes is not going to bring a change. Of course it is more complicated than that. It depends on the individual group and its aims and other factors.

I would like to suggest some guidelines to determine whether such a transformation will happen, in part from looking at Turkey's experience. If you are going to get an Islamic democratic party parallel to the Christian democratic parties of Europe, three things are necessary:

First, there must be a split in the radical Islamist groups because not everybody in the organization will accept moderation and the democratic rules. As long as the whole party remains together the militants will dictate policy and goals.

Second, this requires a charismatic leader who is going to be strong and persuasive enough to break with the past view. This requires both courage and power.

Third, such a transformation must be clearly done so that the membership knows that their ideology, party, and goals are different. It cannot be some superficial or propagandistic exercise designed to fool people but rather a genuine transformation. This includes a clear abandonment of terrorist violence.

I think this is going to be a long and difficult process and that relatively few Islamists are going to do this. It is also going to be easier for parties which accept themselves as leaders of communities within a country--as has happened with the Shia of Iraq--than those who aspire, even like Hizballah in Lebanon which does play a communal role--to take over the whole country and transform the entire region in a revolutionary manner.

An especially important point regarding

Islamist parties is that the most likely thing to moderate them is not the belief that they can gain state power but the belief that they can't gain state power. If Hamas, Hizballah, or the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria believe they really have a chance of gaining control of the state apparatus without transforming themselves into something different, they are much less likely to change their current ideological view and current actual tactical practice.

For example, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has repeatedly renounced violence at least within Egypt in large part because its leaders know what would happen to them if they did not do so. The group has not been involved in any terrorist actions in Egypt for 50 years and its members still get arrested all the time by the Egyptian government. What happens when they no longer believe that the government is capable of acting against them?

In my view, if the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria felt that it could gain power than it is much more likely to use violence than if it doesn't. The irony is, of course, that the regime in Syria is building up the Islamists there to use them as its own instrument and perhaps the day may come when that does not look like such a brilliant strategy.

After all, if their use of terrorist violence and advocacy of a dictatorial Islamist state is winning them wide acclaim and more power, they will obviously think it a mistake to give up these successful strategies. If Hamas is succeeding in Palestinian elections its leadership and members will say: we are doing the right things, we should keep on doing them. In contrast, where they will be more moderate is in a place like Jordan where the Islamists believe they cannot gain state power and thus are ready to make a deal with the regime in exchange for a share of the parliamentary seats and the right to function freely.

Algeria shows the other side of this equation. If the dominant Arab nationalists and the armies believe that Islamists are going to gain power through election, they will crack down hard and the result is a bloody civil war. So I feel for a variety of reasons that the idea that engaging radical Islamists--not moderate Islamists or pious Muslims but radical Islamists--is a mistake that's only going to strengthen them and strengthen their extremism.

Jon Alterman: One of the deep, dark secrets of many of the conferences that we go to in the Middle East is the extent to which people are thinking about Israeli politics when they talk about these issues. You can't really talk about this publicly, but people notice that Israeli politics have successfully integrated a range of religious parties. These parties participate not because they think they can gain control of Israeli politics, but because they think their participation in a coalition (or refusal to participate in a coalition) can influence political outcomes. Both religious and secular parties in Muslim countries wonder if the Israeli model holds lessons for their own politics. The real problem is figuring out how to make that transition--how to get radicals to moderate their views, and how to persuade liberal forces that there is a role for at least some elements of radical (or even strongly orthodox) religious groups.

Without question, some radicals will not moderate. For these groups, we need to find a way to exclude them and split them off from their public support. But are we missing opportunities to guide others into political instead of violent contestation?

Barry Rubin: Very briefly, the key difference in Israeli politics is that religious parties represent communities of people which accept themselves as a set of people who will remain a minority. The party's purpose is to protect their interests in terms of money, patronage, educational systems and so on. This is interesting in light of Iraq because in Iraq the leading party has an Islamic flavor but its main role is as representative of a community. If it accepts that task rather than the idea that it will control the state completely and force everyone to live in the way it advocates, that is a situation that can result in a democratic state. Or will this group demand that everyone in, say, Basra, lives according to what it deems to be Islamic norms. That will result in conflict and a failure of democracy.

The big problem with Islamists in Syria, Egypt, Algeria, and among the Palestinians is that they are seeking to transform and control the state and society. They do not accept any other system. In each of these situations, they seek to mobilize the Sunni majority, so where is there room for another community (Berbers, Alawites, or Copts) except as a protected minority? And how can they accept that many or most Sunnis are going to lead relatively secular lifestyles and be ruled by a law other than that of the Islamists' interpretation of Islam?

Hizballah's situation is slightly different because in Lebanon politics revolve around different communities and the parties represent their interests. If Hizballah were to become a party whose purpose is to gain advantages for its community within Lebanon rather than take over the system, then in fact it--at least within the boundaries of Lebanon, would not be such a gigantic threat. The problem, however, is that there is no sign of this happening so far. In addition, the Shia are 40 percent of the population and growing in numbers. They have reason to believe that what works for them is to be a revolutionary party seeking an Islamist state and using war with Israel as proof of their virtue and a reason for insisting they not be subjected to state control or forced to disarm.

Bruce Maddy-Weizman: I can tell you that at least in Morocco the Islamist parties are deathly afraid of looking like they are trying to assume power. They saw what happened in Algeria. They understand that any grab for power or even a perceived move toward gaining it will lead to a very sharp reaction by the authorities. My sense is that Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood also understands the weight of the Egyptian power structure--the regime, bureaucracy, and military. Thus, they, too, are not looking for power.

What they are looking for is to promote their agenda socially and ultimately politically. They take a longer-term view of these things. They definitely want to get their foot in the door but do not, as far as I understand, seek to take over because they know this would lead to chaos. They may say they want free elections and people talk now about the Muslim Brotherhood being the strongest party in Egypt, if you would ever have free elections. I suggest they are not so interested in going down that path right now.

On another point, the talk about reform and democratization is really not as new as it may seem. In the late 1980s, during the time of economic downturn and crises taking place because of the demographic explosion and the precipitous drop in oil revenue, there was already talk about the need for reform, the

need for change, to fix things. The situation was understood to be rotten. The bargain that existed between the authorities and the population--that the former will provide material goods, the symbols of independence, and pride in exchange for the populace staying out of politics--was breaking down. There was a lot of talk at the time about the need for national dialogue. Actually these frameworks were initiated in a number of different countries, including Jordan, Tunisia, and Egypt. They didn't produce all that much, though maybe more in Jordan than in others.

At any rate, today the best way for change to come is from within. Im very skeptical about the ability of the United States to do social engineering in the politics of other societies. But at the same time there is an interaction between external and internal forces. In the late 1990s, for example, there was a very important cooperative effort between the World Bank people and reform-minded elites in Morocco to produce programs for change which then filtered into the political discourse and dialogue, and have since become a real part of Moroccan life. I think that this was a good example of how interaction between the outside and the inside can produce positive results.

What happened in Morocco in the 1990s was a kind of agreement between the political parties--including the opposition--and the palace, which holds the real power, to bring a tamed opposition into power and engage in gradual reforms that would not challenge the fundamental aspects of the monarchy and state. In that process there has been much talk about institution-building, achieving the rule of law, and insuring the protection of human rights. King Hassan was, of course, a terrible autocrat in the earlier decades of his rule. In the last decade he tried to introduce this kind of shift, attempting to remake himself into a more benign autocrat.

His son, who took power in 1999, has moved further on that road and we have some really interesting things going on in Morocco. One is the Truce and Reconciliation Commission, in which people are testifying on television about the abuses and torture that they experienced. Political dissidents and their families, and even whole towns were being punished for sins against the regime in the 1970s and 1980s. There are limitations to this new exercise in truth telling, as the regime refuses to put people on trial for past sins, or even na me names. There is thus a lot of criticism that the process doesn't go far enough. But there is a dynamic toward dialogue, more open talk about reform, and less dictatorship.

The king does face a dilemma. If he moves too fast, he risks undercutting the legitimacy of his rule; if he moves too slowly it may have the same result. So, the regime maneuvers back and forth. It improves its human rights' record, and then cracks down on journalists--both liberals and Islamists--especially after the Casablanca bombings of 2003. The king talks about promoting democracy, and then appoints as prime minister somebody who wasn't in the electoral process. Morocco has a multi-party electoral process but the political parties and parliament remain outside of the real center of power which is still the king's court.

At the same time, though, the king put forward in October 2003 a revolutionary program to improve the status of women, an issue which has been on the Moroccan agenda for more than a decade. Both his father and he hesitated about doing this for a long time because of conservative and Islamic opposition to raising the status of women. He is doing this as part of his efforts

to build a constituency for himself and for reform. So this is the nature of Moroccan politics: change is coming from above but is also being fed from below. The U.S. government is very encouraging toward Morocco and does not criticize it.

The contrast between Tunisia and Morocco is striking. Tunisia is tolerable on social issues and Western-oriented in international affairs. Yet at the same time this is a regime that hasn't even taken baby steps towards political democratization, after having cracking down in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It is a very autocratic regime. One wonders when the United States or anyone else will really get up and push the Tunisians. At the same time, though, in Tunisia the middle class and civil society basically accepts the regime because it does function and they are afraid of the alternative.

The alternative they do not want is embodied by Algeria, where elections led the way toward civil war. Today, Algeria does not have a reform agenda. Politics is what takes place between the presidential palace and the armed forces. There is a relatively open press, strong liberal activist groups, and efforts to promote women's rights. There is also a Berber sector which is very secular and anti-Islamist. As far as I can see the United States isn't interested in pushing for reform in Algeria. It is more interested cooperating with Algeria in security matters because of the new fear of the radical Islamists in Europe, many of whom come from an Algerian background.

Patrick Clawson: It would seem European states have considerable influence in the Maghreb. To what extent do you think political reform is an issue that European states are particularly concerned about in Maghreb countries and what kind of efforts they are directing towards that end? To what extent, do Maghreb elites see the question of reform as something important for improving their relationships with Europe?

Bruce Maddy-Weizman: I think the European position or positions towards the Maghreb directly relate to what they feel is an immigration and demographic threat. This is a motive for European states to promote economic development in the region. Economic development is not necessarily political reform. I haven't seen a lot of pushing for rapid democratization from the French, for example. I think they are willing to let the regimes from Morocco or Algeria go on their own path. I guess the answer is that they are more concerned with stability than the pace of reform.

The French are particularly cozy with the ruling elites in the Maghreb. In Spain, the left supports the position of the Polisario, which opposes Spain's having given its Western Sahara colony to Morocco. This issue creates a constant source of tension between Spain and Morocco and then plays back on attitudes toward Moroccan immigrants in Spain.

The Maghreb elites, which are Francophone, by and large, want to be as closely connected to Europe and to the West as possible. The Islamists in Morocco accuse the ruling and cultural elites of being pawns of the West, of denying their own cultural heritage.

Joshua Teitelbaum: I'm going to discuss the issue of reform in Saudi Arabia which could be called, "Talking the talk but not walking the walk." The Saudis have a lot of

experience with this pattern. This regime has been in power for a long time because it has been successful at managing challenges, both liberal and conservative, for its whole existence.

This recent wave of protests and talk about reform dates from the late 1990s, when Crown Prince Abdallah became more involved in government and long before the September 11 attacks. The press in Saudi Arabia began to open up around 1999. There were many reasons for this, including the influence of satellite television and the Internet. There were such issues as more participation by women in public life, opening up the press, and so on. One couldn't criticize the regime but one could criticize the government. There were a series of petitions of both liberal and conservative varieties.

So just as it has in the past, the regime has now been reacting to the new wave of challenges by talking about reform and instituting small steps. For the regime, the goal is to talk about reform but do this as another way to stay in power, not accepting democratic values or anything like that. Thus, there were elections for municipal councils but they have no power and half the members are appointed. There is a lot of disappointment, particularly by liberal Saudis over that issue.

A key factor here is the succession to the throne since King Fahd is ill now. [Editorial note: Fahd has since died, and Abdallah has since assumed power. Sultan bin Abd al-Aziz has since been named Crown Prince.] It is hard to know much about this issue since anyone who knows what is going on in the royal family doesn't talk about it while those who talk usually don't know. The transition to Crown Prince Abdallah is a foregone conclusion. But Abdullah is old, barely younger than Fahd. How long can he stay in power or bring about changes? I wish him a long life but still nature takes its course. Then the question is: Who will Abdullah appoint as his crown prince? I really don't think there is a consensus on that. To say the regime faces a lot of challenges is an understatement. I think they are very adept at handling them. I think they will be there for a long time. Of course I think it is in the interest of the United States that it be this regime that stays there.

Danielle Pletka: How do you see any successor to Abdallah being able to deal with the necessary escape valves for the society? We all know there are growing pressures in Saudi society that are being unanswered. Economic pressures are going to keep growing, even with oil prices at this high level. And the birth rate is high.

Joshua Teitelbaum: I don't know who will come next, but I think it will be more of the same. I think they are very good at muddling through. We have talked to them for years about these problems. I think basically the Saudi people are not political to the extent that as long as the government isn't bothering them, they're going to go along with it. I don't foresee disaster because of economic or demographic indicators. It is not inevitable.

Ned Walker: I would like to pursue this a little bit more. I think there are forces being unleashed in Saudi Arabia that are hard to put back in the box. For one thing, you have the national dialogue that went on and presumably has incorporated the will or interests of a number of different elements of this society that have been excluded before--the Shia, the women and others.

What I found very interesting in my discussions there was a general consensus in

the second generation of the royal family. The first generation, the key decision makers, understood that the existing society is not sustainable over the long-run; there has to be a change. What they are not sure of is how to balance the competing will and desires within the society because this is a society that is very conservative in nature. How do you move toward reform and bring women into the system at the same time that you satisfy your conservatives and not have a revolution. The younger people were saying that the elders don't really know how to balance this problem. I think that is what they are facing today.

Jon Alterman: Ned, you mentioned this issue of sustainability. You talked about how the current system is incapable of competing in the modern world. I think it is incapable of *winning* in the modern world, but it will keep competing.

I don't think the political and economic elites in the Middle East look in the mirror and say, "My God, we can't go on like this." They say, instead, "Well it is nice to have change, let's see about having change." When you really listen to senior officials, though, they say, "We have no choice except to maintain the security structure, we have no choice except to maintain the political constraints we have. Otherwise, the whole thing goes over to the extremists." They don't share the fear of some Westerners that the current systems can only lead to disaster. Instead, they look with awe at countries like Singapore that have thrived economically under an authoritarian system. They look at China, a big complicated country that has had economic success without much political liberalization.

I agree completely that there are any number of structures in the Arab states that impede Arab success. But in many cases, the current leaderships fear change more than they fear the status quo.

Ambassador Walker: Yes, but I don't think that your comparisons are apt. First of all, you are not talking about an oil economy. It is quite a different proposition. These other societies had a real economy. Saudi Arabia has an oil economy and they cannot provide for jobs for its people and it isn't training its people. There are pressures in Saudi Arabia you don't have in places like in Singapore or Malaysia and so on.

Danielle Pletka: Right. Even in Singapore and in China the problem is that even if we accept the idea that Saudis and others in the Gulf would move toward what is essentially unbridled capitalism, you have to recognize even in a place like China that is tightly controlled, that unbridled capitalism is opening up a whole political can of worms that I think the Saudis don't really want to open up. Yes, it would be nice to follow this sort of model but you know by doing that of course it doesn't really work that well. I think they would look more at that and worry rather than looking at Singapore.

Patrick Clawson: There are some people that think the U.S. government, for all its talk about democratization, in fact has a policy to go slow and downplay democratization. That is a profound misreading of U.S. policy. In fact U. S. policy is that the best way to achieve democratization is go slow and the best way to achieve democrazation is through the evolution of existing regimes not through

revolution. There are, of course, some regimes which are unlikely to evolve but in every case it would be best if in fact these regimes would evolve in the direction of democracy and that is what the United States wants to support.

It is a profound misreading therefore to see the question about the promotion of democracy as being like tides which come in and go out twice a day. The evolution toward democratization is going to be a process which is going to last decades. The pace that we should measure it against is, in fact, the experiences of Europe where, it is useful to remember, it took centuries. In America's case it took decades. In the United States it took us 90 years after our independence before we got rid of slavery, another 50 before women's suffrage. I think the pace of change in the Middle East will be much more rapid than either Europe or the United States but it is certainly going to be the case that it will be a generations' long change.

U.S. policy thinks the evolution of democracy is going to be a long process. It is also the case that the United States can see how this promotion of democracy can be well-coordinated with the other issues that the United States is pushing in the region. So I don't think you see at the level of the president or at the level of many of many senior-level officials in this administration a sense that we must manage the trade-off between promotion of democracy on the one hand, and other items on our agenda such as the fight against terrorism or proliferation of weapons of mass destruction on the other hand. There is not a sense at the top level of this administration that this is a real problem and real concern.

There is the sense for instance in the deal with Libya that it is possible to have dialogue with the Libyans now on a whole range on human rights and political reform issues which the United States previously did not. So that in fact progress we make toward control of weapons of mass destruction in fact opens the door for us to have greater progress, greater dialogue about political reform.

I also had argued this administration is firmly persuaded that foreign pressure helps in this process of democratization and the experience of the last six months has profoundly reinforced that sense that foreign pressure helps. You receive this in a variety of countries in the Middle East where local groups that don't particularly like the U.S. government and are quite vocal about that fact simultaneously tell us that foreign pressure helps and it helps creates openings. We're seeing this in countries as varied as Syria and Egypt. It is very interesting watching the way in which the Egyptian judges or many in the Egyptian opposition who are highly unsympathetic with the U.S. government simultaneously say it is U.S. pressure which creates opportunities for them.

It is quite likely in this process of evolution toward democratization what we're going to see first is an increased space for liberty and not a space for regime change. That is, after all, the historical precedent in almost any country I can think of that moves into a process of democratization, whether it is in Europe or Asia.

So, yes, it is highly likely that we're going to see a decades-long period in which there are greater opportunities for personal freedoms and indeed even for political freedoms without the regimes being in any way something that can be brought into question. And that will be read by someone as showing the profound limitations of your democratization program and how it is being

manipulated by ruling regimes and these ruling regimes are not ever going to allow anybody to threaten them.

Well, sorry, folks, that is not the way history has shown. If we go back and look at the literature of the 1960s and 1970s about Taiwan or South Korea, we can see widespread scholarly and political consensus that these regimes would never open up, that they will provide, instead, spaces for liberties and freedoms but open up? Forget it. That was the consensus, but it is not what history shows actually happened.

I thought Crown Prince Abdallah was correct in his interviews in Crawford, Texas, when he said that true democracy would come to Saudi Arabia and the question is how long it would take. I'm emphasizing that this process is going to be a slow process. However, another lesson we learn out of history is that the there will be long periods without much change and others with dramatic changes. I don't think many of us would have expected in January 2005 that Syrian troops would be out of Lebanon within a few months. That happened really fast in a way no one would have believed beforehand.

I remember participating in some exercises before the U.S. invasion of Iraq where the U.S. government assembled academics to help it understand when states failed. This group had been meeting for years, trying to come up with predictors of when the states would fail. One of the conclusions that these academics came to, is that they were unable to identify a single case in the last 200 years in which experts had predicted a revolution. It just doesn't happen. We don't see them coming. We should not expect that we are going to be able to see them coming. There are going to be revolutions in this area and there are going to be counterrevolutions in this area. That will be inevitable in this process of democratization.

By the way, I would make one comment about U.S. attitudes these days toward revolutions. Despite all we say about stability in the region, I think there is a broad consensus in the U.S. government that there are certain regimes we would not lift a finger to help if it looked as if they were about to fall, even though we haven't a clue what would replace them. That includes the Assad regime in Syria. If it looks like Assad was going down, if it looked as if we would not have the slightest idea what would happen afterward, the U.S. government would not lift a finger.

As for the question on the Islamists, I think we could agree that in many cases the Islamists' attitude towards democracy is hypocritical. They want to have one man, one vote, one time until they could seize power. That said, it is in the interest of the rest to encourage them to participate in the political process. We would rather have them in the tent rather than outside the tent. We would rather have them shouting than shooting. Indeed, I think the West can work with Islamists who convincingly renounce violence. That is the ultimate test, convincingly renouncing violence and being willing to participate in the democratic process. That was the test we have seen applied in Europe, towards the IRA and the test in Israel toward the PLO. Convincingly renouncing violence is what matters here.

I would say that in fact Im reasonably confident that Islamists in power, in general, will go in one of two directions. Either they

will evolve as in Turkey to become much more democratically committed and willing to work within the democratic structure or they will fail as they have in Iran and not be able to pass on power to a second generation. So in the grand sweep of history I think even Islamists when they come to power are going to move in one of those two directions.

I say that the West can work with those who convincingly renounce violence. That said, we do have a stake in who wins. I think we should make it clear we want to encourage the liberal forces in these Arab societies. We are not interested in promoting Islamists. They don't stand for our values. By the way, I would argue, as a closing comment, that it is a mistake to say that what we are interested is promoting moderate Muslims. I think that is an insult to all concerned. We are interested in promoting those who work within the democratic state. Those who will work for a democratic state we will work with whether they are atheist, temperate in their religious views, or extremist in their religious views. I don't care what the individual's religious attitudes are and what his religious practices are, so long as he is committed to working within the democratic state.

That is a lesson we can draw indeed from the involvement in U.S. politics of people who have rather extreme religious viewpoints. I continue to be appalled that one-third of all Americans think that the world was created in six days. That is not my view of what constitutes a moderate religious viewpoint but it is the viewpoint of one-third of Americans. Yet on the other hand I'm happy to have them participate in the political process because they are firmly committed to a democratic state. So I think we would do best to say that our attitude towards the participation of Islamists in politics is that we welcome their participation in politics but we will actively encourage and support and promote more liberal voices in those societies.

Barry Rubin: On the Islamist/Islamic issue let's talk about Iraq. In Iraq the party that won the January 2005 election with the biggest number of votes is clearly a strongly Islamic-influenced party which accepts democracy. I don't call them Islamists because they are seeking an Islamic-flavored society and an important role for Islam in the society but are not demanding Islam runs the society and leaves no room for anything else. I call that an Islamic party; you can call it a moderate Islamic party.

The question, however, relates to the phrase convincingly renounced violence. Because the question is, for how long? One of the most important reasons why Iraq has worked as well as it has--and it could have been even worse--is that the leading Shia cleric, Ayatollah Sistani, is a relative moderate. But when he dies and some of the other people in that party who are not so moderate take over, they may have convincingly renounced violence but that renunciation may expire. That is why I stressed three conditions for the transformation of an Islamist movement into an Islamic democratic party: a split with the extremists, a leader who persuades the followers to make a break with the past, and a real change of goals and ideology.

My book on this subject of liberal Arab movements, their opponents, and the question of democratization in the Middle East is entitled The Long War for Freedom, the Arab Struggle for Democracy in the Middle East. I emphasize here the word "long." If we are going to say this is going to take a historical era--35 to 100 years--then we should take this seriously in terms of our analysis. If we are

going to talk about what might be called the future history of the Middle East, what are some of the points we would want to make? Obviously, as Patrick Clawson pointed out, we try to make predictions that are often wrong. But we have to try to understand the direction of events. Let me suggest some likely trends.

First of all, continued stagnation. If incumbent regimes are going to continue to be in power for a long time to come then this is going to be the main element of the situation, even if there are going to be periodic advances or crises. Economic, social, and political developments are going to be slow.

Second, Iraq's experiment is going to be a prime indicator whose relative success or failure will be one of the first to become clear. Despite the long-term nature of transition I think that 12 months from now we will have a very good sense of the extent to which it had worked. The key question is whether in 2006 there will be a stable Iraqi system and government in Iraq within which the communal partners are able to work together, able to dispense gradually with a foreign troop presence, and making real progress against the insurgency even if violence continues. Clearly, whether or not this experience is deemed to be a success will have a major effect on the pace and direction of events elsewhere. It might work or it might fall apart.

A third area is the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Israel and Palestinian issue. The things being said in this discussion make me more skeptical that there is going to be a comprehensive resolution or even major diplomatic progress. This is not going to happen until and unless there will be a change in Palestinian goals, methods, and political culture. I don't see this happening fast and some indicators--the political rise of Hamas, the radicalism of many in the younger Fatah generation, the reflection of so much propaganda inciting extremism and hatred--are showing developments in a direction diametrically opposite from those promoting peace. The survival of the existing Arab political systems, which find continuing the conflict and the worldview making it inevitable so useful to their survival, is another factor militating against a real, or at least formal, peace.

Fourth, the Middle East's continuing role as a prime area for crises, struggle and violence. Some of these will take place because of the absence of moderating and democratic change; others will occur as part of the process of that change. Consider again the Algerian case. It was the prospects of a free election likely to be won by Islamists--and Islamists far less extreme than many others in the region--that led to a reaction by the existing regime followed by a civil war and the deaths of tens of thousands of people. It is going to be a while before the Algerian system is going to have truly free elections.

Fifth, there is going to be a tremendous competition between three systems. In every Arab state and among the Palestinians there is going to be a battle between Arab nationalists, Islamist radicals, and moderate democrats. The regimes will try to co-opt the liberals by pretending to be reformers and taking advantage of their fear of the Islamists. The current rulers will also use the Islamists by portraying themselves as pious Muslims who battle the West and Israel.

Finally, it is pretty clear that in the long-run the radical Islamists will not triumph in

the region. As we see in Iran's case when they're in power, they don't do a great job and are by no means assured of maintaining mass support. But the Soviet Union lasted 70 years and as a direct result millions of people died. The Third Reich lasted 13 and as a result more millions perished. The Iranian regime is very unpopular at home but still going strong in terms of control more than 25 years after the revolution, with no end in sight.

So the fact that there will be a long and difficult process, many setbacks along the way, and that radical Islamists might gain power in one or more countries is a very serious prognosis. One hundred years from now, many of these wars, crises, disasters, and repressions might be mere footnotes in history but that is not a great deal of comfort for those who will live--or worse, not live--through them. If we say that we believe the story is going to have a happy ending, there is still a lot to be concerned about in terms of the middle.

Danielle Pletka: I think the rubric Patrick puts on is exactly the right one. Which is at the end of the day if you are 100 percent committed to a democratic process, then whatever you think about women driving or anything else is immaterial? The problem really is there will be a temptation in that very pure outlook to blur the line on the commitment to democracy. That, in fact, what we will have is the Hizballah or Hamas problem, which is that these groups are committed to democracy for what it can give them but continue to have their armed wing active. Then, our definitions won't work that well any more.

Ned Walker: As a final remark I would like to warn that while we've all talked about the long process let's be careful we don't stretch that length out so far that we lose the initiative and incentive for people to move. Yes, it is going to take time but I think a lot can be done within this generation. Certainly we ought to be encouraging that type of activity.

Patrick Clawson: Punctuated equilibrium is the expression that is used to describe the theory of evolution. I suspect that's how we are going to see the progress of democracy and reform in the Middle East. It wouldn't surprise me in the least if we saw dramatic progress forward in at least one Middle Eastern country in the course of the next decade. I can fully anticipate that there is going to be dramatic shifts somewhere. I don't know where it's going to be. I have candidates. I happen to think for instance that Iran is ripe for another revolution. It could, in fact, however take a lot longer than that before this change happens.

It wouldn't surprise me also if there were dramatic changes that took place in some country like the United Arab Emirates, which has been the laggard compared to some of its neighbors so far. In Dubai you certainly can see a awful lot of unbridled capitalism and the creation of a class of people who are prepared to accept rapid and dramatic changes. So I would like to echo Ned's comment that, yes, this is part of the long-term process but I would expect dramatic changes to take place in some places during the course of that process.

Jon Alterman: Just a couple of points. One is I think this administration is going to maintain a keen interest in the idea of democratization in the Middle East. Yet, as we think about these long-term processes that take several decades, we need to recall that the US government is not very good at efforts

that take several decades. We were able to fight the Cold War for four decades because the nuclear threat kept focusing people's minds. The idea of having a three-decades'-long U.S. government commitment to democratization in the Middle East in the midst of all the other things we're going to have to do regarding counter-terrorism, peace issues and everything else, I don't think is viable. There will be change in the region, but the idea that the U.S. government is going to make it happen is misplaced. My guess is that over time we will have about 5% of the total influence on what is happening. Most of it will come from trends within the region--demographics, changes in technology, from home-grown social and political movements--over which the US government as a government has very little control.

Danielle Pletka: I think that without the United States, nothing will happen. I think that there will be exactly the scenario that was described for Saudi Arabia, which is that they will muddle through with as much fealty to the status quo as possible if the U.S. government sits on the sidelines. I think the U.S. government is the sine qua non of change and evolution or revolution in the Middle East. And I sure hope whoever is president next doesn't give up the fight.

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