

## Toward Greater Democracy in the Muslim World

On November 10–12, 2002, 118 countries exhibiting real foundations of democracies, along with 21 other observer nations, attended the Community of Democracies ministerial hosted by the Republic of Korea. A number of the countries at that meeting in Seoul have Muslim majorities, including Afghanistan, Algeria, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Jordan, Kuwait, Mali, Morocco, Nigeria, Qatar, Turkey, and Yemen. The fact that so many Muslim countries were invited to Seoul either as mature democracies or as observers on the road to becoming more democratic reflects the promising developments taking place throughout the Muslim world. Although the Muslim world includes diverse countries and peoples spanning a large geographic area, there are important commonalities within this diversity. One important trait shared by Muslims is that, when given the opportunity, they are choosing democracy.

President George W. Bush spoke directly to this point when he addressed graduating seniors at West Point in June 2002: “When it comes to the common rights and needs of men and women, there is no clash of civilizations. The requirements of freedom apply fully to Africa and Latin America and the entire Islamic world. The peoples of the Islamic nations want and deserve the same freedoms and opportunities as people in every nation. And their governments should listen to their hopes.”

People in many other parts of the world have embraced democracy through a wave of transitions that began in Portugal and Spain in the mid-1970s, reached Latin America and East Asia in the 1980s, and crested following the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union. Samuel Huntington and Larry Diamond have called these recent periods of change

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the “Third Wave,”<sup>1</sup> as it encompasses the third and most significant spike in the number of democracies created, following those born after World War I and during post–World War II decolonization. Now, we stand on the edge of a fourth wave—one with the strength to bring democracy throughout the Muslim world.

Despite a number of encouraging signs, a freedom deficit exists today in many parts of the Muslim world, particularly in Arab countries. Although all people, including Muslims, are ultimately responsible for their own form of government, the United States can help address this deficit. Historically, U.S. efforts to promote democracy throughout the Muslim world have sometimes been halting and incomplete. By listening to those people most directly affected and building on eight lessons learned from its experience in other parts of the world, the United States and its allies can help bring democracy to the Muslim world—an objective in the interest of the people in the Middle East region as well as of those in all democratic nations around the world, including the United States itself.

### **Why Work So Hard to Promote Democracy?**

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At the most fundamental level, U.S. support for democracy is a matter of principle. It has been and remains at the very heart of what we are as a nation and who we are as a people. The United States will assist other nations to achieve the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, not because these values are lifestyles the United States thinks it ought to export, but because they are universal, self-evident, and inalienable.

There are also practical reasons for the United States to promote democracy abroad, demonstrating that realism and idealism are complementary. Quite simply, the United States will prosper more as a people and as a nation in a world of democracies than in a world of authoritarian or chaotic regimes.

That a more democratic world is a more peaceful world—evidenced by the historical pattern of established democracies not warring with one another—is among the most demonstrable findings in the study of international relations. Overlapping interests and fruitful cooperation between democracies and nondemocracies can still occur, as can democracies’ strong disagreements with fellow democracies; nonetheless, increasing the quantity of democracies increases the quality of diplomacy. For example, despite a long history culminating in two world wars, Europe’s democracies do not contemplate war with one another today. When Great Britain and Germany have a dispute, they work it out over a conference table, not on a battlefield.

The spread of democracy through Latin America, reaching almost the entire region, has also substantially reduced the prospects of war in the Western Hemisphere. Coinciding with their democratic consolidations, Brazil and Argentina chose to abandon the pursuit of nuclear arms. When the Organization of American States' Democratic Charter was signed in Lima, Peru, on the day of the September 11 attacks, every country in the hemisphere, with the exception of Cuba, pledged to reinforce democracy at home and to come to the aid of a neighbor if democracy is threatened or faltering.

Democracy is also closely linked to prosperity. Economic growth in South Korea, Taiwan, and Chile helped create a stronger foundation for democracy in each of these nations, while the transparent rule of law and greater equality of opportunity fostered by democracy in turn helps spur economic growth and prosperity. Peaceful and predictable transitions of power, more openness, and less corruption in Mexico, for example, have established conditions under which more durable economic growth can flourish.

**We stand on the edge of a fourth wave of democratization.**

## **Defining and Developing Democracy**

Democracy represents more than institutions and elections. At its most fundamental level, democracy is based on a diffusion of power in government and in society. In a democratic government, power is distributed such that no one voice dominates. Checks and balances are needed—something requiring a healthy competition between legislative and executive branches and a functioning and independent judiciary. A strong government must face the constraint of an electable opposition at every level. Democratic leaders enjoy temporary power that must be transferred. John Adams was a great U.S. president for many reasons, but arguably none was more important than his willingness to relinquish power peacefully when he lost a bitterly contested election to Thomas Jefferson. Democratic leaders lease their authority rather than own it, so to speak, because their grant of authority comes from the people. The office retains the power, not the individual.

Just as some checks and balances are needed within governments, democracy equally necessitates checks and balances between government and society. Power must be shared with a vital, pluralistic civil society that possesses the “associational life” of which Alexis de Tocqueville wrote 170 years ago, namely, a wide array of private groups and private institutions including political parties, trade unions, business associations, schools, and media in-

dependent from one another and from state control. In addition, no ethnic group, gender, or class of people can be excluded from full participation in political life. Democracy inherently requires and protects individual rights of freedom of speech and worship.

Dynamic reform experiments underway in many parts of the Muslim world demonstrate that democracy and Islam are compatible. In September 2002, citizens of Morocco voted in the freest, fairest, and most transparent elections in the country's history, creating a diverse new parliament. In October 2002, the people of Bahrain cast votes for the first time in 30 years to

elect a parliament. That election also marked the first time women ran for national office. Recently, Oman's Sultan Qaboos announced that he is extending the vote for the Consultative Shura Council to all his country's adult citizens. In early 2003, Qatar announced a new constitution in anticipation of upcoming parliamentary elections. Yemen can now boast not only of a multiparty system and an elected parliament,

but also of directly elected municipal officials and, since 1999, a directly elected president. Following the Persian Gulf War, Kuwait reinstated its directly elected National Assembly; Kuwaitis are currently preparing for the next round of parliamentary elections slated for July 2003.

Elements of democracy are also present in Muslim-majority states such as Malaysia, Pakistan, Indonesia, Albania, Djibouti, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Sierra Leone. These experiments with democracy have a long way to go before democracy is consolidated, but that should not obscure the fact that significant progress is being made.

Muslims also participate fully and actively in the civic life of democratic countries in which they are not a majority. Some 40 percent of Muslims worldwide live as minorities in their countries, including several million in the United States. In countries such as India, France, and South Africa, Muslims put the lie to the canard that Muslim life is somehow incompatible with democratic participation.

The potential for greater democracy elsewhere in the Muslim world exists as well. The strong demand for democratic institutions exists among the Palestinian people, and the United States is working, along with the European Union and Arab states, to help Palestinians create a new constitutional framework and a working democracy. President Bush noted:

[A]n end to occupation and a peaceful democratic Palestinian state may seem distant, but America and our partners throughout the world stand ready to help ... make them possible as soon as possible. If liberty can

**Stability based on authority alone is illusory and ultimately impossible to sustain.**

blossom in the rocky soil of the West Bank and Gaza, it will inspire millions of men and women around the globe who are equally weary of poverty and oppression, equally entitled to the benefits of democratic government.<sup>2</sup>

In Iran, widespread clamor for reform exists, hopefully resulting in greater democracy and openness. The Iranian people are struggling with difficult questions about how to build a modern twenty-first-century society that is at once Muslim, prosperous, and free. In the last two Iranian presidential elections and in nearly a dozen parliamentary and local elections, the vast majority of the Iranian people voted for political and economic reform.

Iraq deserves mention in this context, too. The United States is a friend to the talented people of Iraq and supports their aspirations. As President Bush said in his February 2003 American Enterprise Institute address, “The United States has no intention of determining the precise form of Iraq’s new government. That choice belongs to the Iraqi people. Yet, we will ensure that one brutal dictator is not replaced by another. All Iraqis must have a voice in the new government, and all citizens must have their rights protected.”<sup>3</sup> The United States and its partners are prepared to help the Iraqi people create the institutions of liberty in a free and unified Iraq.

## Ending the Democracy Deficit

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Despite some encouraging signs, Adrian Karatnycky, president of Freedom House, documents in that organization’s 2001–2002 “Survey of Freedom” that “a dramatic gap [exists] between the levels of freedom and democracy in the Islamic countries—particularly in their Arabic core—and in the rest of the world.”<sup>4</sup> Only one out of every four countries with Muslim majorities has a democratically elected government. Moreover, the gap between Muslim countries and the rest of the world is widening. Over the past 20 years, democracy and freedom expanded into countries in Latin America, Africa, Europe, and Asia; but the Muslim world is still struggling. By Freedom House’s standards, the number of “free” countries around the world increased by nearly three dozen over the past 20 years, but not one of them was a Muslim-majority state.<sup>5</sup>

This phenomenon has been validated by non-Western scholars as well. In the summer of 2002, a team of more than 30 Arab scholars produced the *Arab Human Development Report*, written on behalf of the United Nations Development Program and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development. It portrays an Arab world that lags behind other regions in key measures, including individual freedom and women’s empowerment as well as economic and social development. Disturbing trends, such as a youth

bulge combined with youth unemployment rates—reaching almost 40 percent in some places—highlight potentially explosive social conditions.<sup>6</sup> The Arab world faces serious problems that can only be met by more flexible, democratic political systems.

Muslims cannot blame the United States for their lack of democracy. Still, the United States does play a large role on the world stage; and in many parts of the Muslim world, particularly in the Arab world, successive

U.S. administrations—Republican and Democratic alike—have not made democratization a sufficient priority.

**Successive U.S. administrations have not made democratization a sufficient priority.**

At various times, the United States has avoided scrutinizing the internal workings of countries in the interests of ensuring a steady flow of oil; containing Soviet, Iraqi, and Iranian expansionism; addressing issues related to the Arab-Israeli conflict; resisting communism in East Asia; or securing basing rights for the U.S. military. Yet, the role that democracy plays in providing domestic

stability—recently recognized as key to U.S. interests in pursuing the war on terrorism—has been made vividly evident by the absence of terrorism emanating from India’s large Muslim community. Several prominent Indian Muslims with whom I have met have given the anecdotal explanation that India is a democratic country; the ability to participate fully and freely—having full recourse to the judicial system—mitigates the desire to act violently against the government or majority population.

By failing to help foster gradual paths to democratization in numerous important U.S. relationships—yielding to what might be called a “democratic exception” in parts of the Muslim world—the United States has missed an opportunity to help these countries adapt to the stresses of a globalizing world. Continuing to make this exception is not in U.S. interests; as clearly conveyed in the 2002 National Security Strategy, U.S. policy will be more actively engaged in supporting democratic trends globally with no exception for the Muslim world. This commitment has been made with the full knowledge that democracies are imperfect, in addition to being terribly complicated. Leaders in some Muslim states contrast democratic systems with their more orderly systems and point with satisfaction to the seeming stability that alternatives to democracy provide. Yet, stability based on authority alone is illusory and ultimately impossible to sustain. Iran, Romania, and Liberia illustrate that rigid authoritarian systems cannot withstand the shocks of social, political, or economic change, especially at the pace that characterizes the modern world.

Yet, as we make democratization a higher priority in our dealings with the Muslim world, just as medical doctors take the Hippocratic oath, the United States must, above all else, do no harm. Unrestrained zeal to make the world better could make it worse. Such a task must be undertaken with humility. As the countries and peoples of the Muslim world move toward more open and democratic development, the United States and its allies must not only encourage and help them but also listen to those people most directly affected, as the stakes for others are far greater than for ourselves.

## U.S. Motives

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The U.S. rationale in promoting democratization in the Muslim world is both altruistic and self-interested. Countries plagued by economic stagnation and lack of opportunity, closed political systems, and burgeoning populations fuel the alienation of their citizens. As we have learned the hard way, such societies can breed the kind of extremists and terrorists who target the United States for supporting the regimes under which they live. Equally important, the growing gulf between many Muslim regimes and their citizens potentially compromises the ability of these governments to cooperate on issues of vital importance to the United States. These domestic pressures will increasingly limit the ability of many regimes in the Muslim world to provide assistance—or even acquiesce—to U.S. efforts to combat terrorism or address the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

**The risk of inaction can be just as grave as that of taking action.**

Discussions about these issues with people from a wide range of backgrounds and orientations during my recent trips to Pakistan, Egypt, and Persian Gulf states have convinced me that their greatest frustration with the United States largely lies in the U.S. failure privately and publicly to emphasize the desirability of democracy. These populations widely interpret this silence as tacit approval of the status quo. Although this is decidedly not the case, these firsthand conversations have illustrated how, in the conduct of foreign policy, the risk of inaction can be just as grave as that of taking action. Some have argued that the United States is prepared only to support electoral outcomes that please Washington, which is untrue. The United States will support democratic processes even if those empowered do not choose policies strategically in line with U.S. interests. U.S. relations with governments, however, even if fairly elected, will depend both on how those governments treat their people and on how they act on the interna-

tional stage on issues ranging from terrorism to trade to nonproliferation to drugs.

In promoting democracy, the United States is well aware that a sudden move toward open elections in Muslim-majority countries could bring parties with an Islamic character greater power. The reason for such election results is not that such parties enjoy the overwhelming confidence of the population but that they are often the only organized opposition to a status quo found unacceptable by a growing number of people. That said, let there be no misunderstanding: the United States is not opposed to parties with an Islamic character in positions of responsibility, as proven by U.S. receptivity to the outcome of Turkey's recent election. After taking the oath of office, Turkey's then-prime minister Abdullah Gul said it best: "Our aim is to show the world that a country, which has a Muslim population, can also be democratic, transparent and modern and cooperate with the world."<sup>7</sup> The U.S. government is committed to assisting the Turks in this goal and confident that the Turks can achieve it.

## Lessons Learned

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The United States is committing more than simply verbal encouragement to the democratization of the Muslim world. Secretary of State Colin Powell announced a new partnership in December 2002 that focuses on encouraging development in three areas critical to progress in the Arab nations: economic, educational, and political reform. Under this Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), the United States will provide new resources for this effort, in addition to the \$1 billion already spent annually in economic assistance to regional Muslim nations. As the United States funds new projects under MEPI and in Muslim nations beyond the Middle East intended to expand political participation, support civil society, and fortify the rule of law, the United States will be guided by eight lessons learned in other parts of the world.

- *There are many models of democracy.*

The democratic process need not follow a single model. From constitutional monarchies to federal republics to parliamentary systems of all stripes, history underscores the diversity of democracy. The enormous diversity of the Muslim world demands that political systems adapt to suit their local environment.

- *Elections do not make a democracy.*

As seen in Iraqi elections in which Saddam Hussein won one hundred percent of the vote, the most brutal regimes often seek to legitimize their rule through sham elections. Hence, for elections to be a true reflection of the

people, they must be embedded in societies with strong civil institutions and a diffusion of power. Bahrain's experience illustrates this point: its credible, fair, and free recent elections were held only after Bahrain had taken steps to free political prisoners, remove arbitrary powers from the constitution, reform the judiciary, and allow the media to function independently. By contrast, Algeria's 1991 experience, where the absence of a developed civic life resulted both in the ascendancy of extremists and their checkmate by military power, highlights the dangers of holding elections in the absence of a pluralist society.

- *Democracy takes time.*

Democratization is best measured not in weeks or months but in years, decades, and generations. As national security adviser Condoleezza Rice noted, "Because of our own history, the United States knows we must be patient and humble. Change—even if it is for the better—is often difficult. And progress is often slow."<sup>8</sup> U.S. democracy is far from perfect and is always open to improvement, as demonstrated by amendments to the Constitution and steps taken to provide African-Americans and women the full rights of citizenry.

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- *Democracy rests on an informed and educated populace.*

Education enables people to know their rights and how to exercise them. An educated populace capable of making informed decisions helps democracy take root. Countries throughout the Muslim world have made remarkable progress promoting literacy, but they have done a poorer job creating populations that are well read. Schools serve a society well by fostering a spirit of inquiry and exploration rather than rote memorization, which can prove to be the opposite of true education. Muslim commentators note that Muslim educational systems are not necessarily preparing students to succeed in the twenty-first century. Abdel Hamid al-Ansari, the dean of the faculty of *shari'a* at Qatar University, has identified the problem quite directly: "A significant part of our educational discourse is cut off from the modern sciences, and is based on a uni-dimensional view, creating a closed mentality and an easy slide towards fanaticism. It plants misconceptions about women and religious or ethnic minorities; it is dominated by memorization and repetitive methods."<sup>9</sup>

- *Independent and responsible media are essential.*

Free media are a key element of civil society. A multitude of views, ideas, and perspectives aired in the free marketplace of ideas is the best expression of a healthy civil society. Independent media, however, like governments

and citizens, have responsibilities to uphold professional standards and insist on factual reporting. The media should educate, not just advocate.

- *Women are vital to democracy.*

Countries cannot succeed as democracies if more than half their population is denied basic democratic rights. Women's rights are a key determinant of the overall vibrancy of any society. Patriarchal societies in which women play a subservient role to men are also societies in which men play subservient roles to other men, and meritocracy takes a back seat to connections and cronyism.

- *Political and economic reforms are mutually reinforcing.*

Market-based economic modernization helps usher in elements of democracy—the rule of law, transparent decision-making, the free exchange of ideas—which in turn sustain and accelerate economic growth, though this path need not be sequential. When political and economic freedom work hand in hand, democratization allows the young to voice their aspirations while reinforced economic growth gives them hope for a future of greater opportunity and prosperity.

- *Although it can be encouraged from outside, democracy is best built from within.*
- Democratization is a process fundamentally driven by a country's citizens. Only they can promote a spirit and practice of tolerance so that the rights of minorities and individuals are respected. If the United States or another foreign government tries to impose the trappings of democracy on a country, the result will be neither democratic nor durable. Even in Afghanistan and Iraq, where the United States has intervened militarily, it will ultimately be Afghans and Iraqis who must have the leading role in making democracy work.

## **The Democratic Agenda and Beyond**

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While working toward the development of legitimate democracy in the Muslim world, all nations must contend with numerous urgent issues. Festering conflicts between Israel and the Arab world must be quelled by realizing President Bush's vision of two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security. Similarly, the United States is working with the Iraqi people to build a democracy. International assistance must continue to be devoted to Afghanistan now that it has been liberated, and intensive diplomacy must be applied to India and Pakistan to help encourage normalized relations, including a mutually acceptable solution to Kashmir.

Promoting democracy in the Muslim world is not a task for the United States alone. The United States will work with democratic allies as well as nongovernmental organizations, foundations, and individuals. Equally important is the role the U.S. business community can play in this process—potentially with a huge, positive impact through investment, employment practices, and support for education and training.

The task, although daunting, is not impossible. The U.S. government has been deeply involved in helping many Muslim-majority countries develop democratic institutions and the societal infrastructure necessary for democracy to take root. For years, the United States has promoted educational and cultural exchanges with peoples and institutions throughout the Muslim world to strengthen the components of civil society and participatory government and is working energetically to promote economic prosperity as an engine of democratic change. Membership in the World Trade Organization promotes both economic and political liberalization; the United States is prepared to encourage that integration process and to consider free-trade agreements, such as the ones the United States has concluded with Jordan and is discussing with Morocco.

The United States is also working through a wide variety of programs, such as the International Visitors Program and the provision of grants to local educational institutions, to promote the development of democracy's building blocs, including professional and balanced journalism free from state control, active nongovernmental institutions, and independent judiciaries. U.S. government-funded institutions, such as the National Endowment for Democracy as well as the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute, are working in numerous Muslim-majority countries to help foster democratic institutions. Americans have served as observers throughout the democratizing world, including the Muslim world, to help ensure free and fair elections. The United States also funds a significant portion of the activities of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in the Muslim countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus, contributing to the development of model electoral codes, strengthened roles for human rights ombudsmen, and practical training for independent media.

The road to democracy is long. The United States has been on it for more than 225 years, and it has yet to reach the final destination of a perfected democracy. Still, every step brings benefits to citizens, countries, regions,

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and the global community at large. The United States must do more to help pave that road, but in the end, the decision to move toward democracy belongs to the people of the Muslim world. This move is the only way in which Muslim societies—and all societies for that matter—can best maximize the potential of all of their people and realize those people’s aspirations for a future defined by greater freedom, greater peace, and greater prosperity.

## Notes

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1. See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991); Larry Diamond et al., eds., *Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).
2. George W. Bush, remarks at the White House, June 24, 2002.
3. George W. Bush, address to the American Enterprise Institute, Washington, D.C., February 26, 2003.
4. Adrian Karatnycky, “The 2001-2002 Freedom House Survey of Freedom: The Democracy Gap,” in Adrian Karatnycky, ed., *Freedom in the World, 2001-2002: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2002), p. 7.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
6. United Nations Development Program (UNDP), *Arab Human Development Report 2002: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations* (New York: UNDP, 2002).
7. “Gul to Unveil Reform Cabinet Today,” *Turkish Daily News*, November 18, 2002.
8. Condoleezza Rice, lecture, New York City, October 1, 2002.
9. Sheikh 'Abdel Al-Hamid Al-Ansari, “Landmarks in Rational and Constructive Dialogue with the ‘Other,’” *Al-Hayat* (London), May 31, 2002, as translated by Middle East Media Research Institute, “Leading Islamic Clerics Come Out for Reform in Arab-Islamic Society,” *Special Dispatches Series* no. 386 (June 5, 2002).