

**Statement to the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing  
“Iraq - Next Steps: How can democratic institutions succeed in Iraq and the  
Middle East?”**

**Washington, D.C.  
Wednesday, September 24, 2003**

**By Rami G. Khouri  
Executive Editor, the Daily Star newspaper, Beirut, Lebanon**

Mr. Chairman, Committee Members, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for this opportunity to share some thoughts with you on an issue of immense and urgent importance to Americans and Middle Easterners alike –promoting democracy throughout the Middle East. I have spent all my adult life in the region working towards this goal, and am personally delighted that democratization in the Middle East should now be raised as a potential American foreign policy objective. The objective is noble, appropriate, and achievable. The demand among the people of our region is great. Yet men and women in the Middle East and the United States who seek to achieve this worthy goal face a landscape littered with obstacles that can be traced back to indigenous Arab and Middle Eastern causes but also to the conduct of the USA and other foreign powers. Most of these constraints are man-made, and they can be removed if we forge appropriate policies and work diligently and consistently. I would like to offer some observations and suggestions based on my analysis of sentiments throughout the Arab World, the region I know best, though some of these thoughts are also relevant to Turkey, Iran, Israel, and other non-Arab parts of the Middle East.

This is a critical time in the Middle East, when its own citizens and many friends around the world are exploring why this region remains the least democratic part of the globe. If the United States in particular truly seeks to promote democracy in Iraq and the wider region, it would do well to start by correctly analyzing three critical factors: Why has democracy not spread throughout this region? What has been the United States’ role in this matter in modern history? And what do the people of the region feel about democracy, and what are they doing to achieve it?

There are tens of millions of people for you to work with on this goal throughout the Middle East, but they have mostly been silenced by their own governments, and ignored by the American government and others around the world. I would suggest the following main reasons why the Middle East remains a region largely devoid of democratic governments:

1. The legacy of autocratic, sometimes authoritarian, rule in our region, almost always with the explicit, sustained support of foreign governments, including the US government. Arab democrats have never had a chance, and they are understandably skeptical to hear the USA

suddenly promoting a policy of rapid democratization in the Middle East. Washington's credibility on this, like its track record, is very thin.

2. The many years of the Cold War reinforced the static, non-democratic nature of the Middle Eastern political order, as the two superpowers provided economic, political, and military support for their clients in the area.

3. The Arab-Israeli conflict provided a means for autocratic rulers to avoid democratic transformations and instead to promote security-minded regimes, by arguing that the regional conflict made defense a greater priority than democracy

4. The post-WWI colonial legacy made it virtually impossible for Arab public opinion to manifest itself for democratic governance, given that colonial authorities usually transferred political and military power in most countries to hand-picked local elites, who quickly consolidated their grip on power or were overthrown by military coups whose leaders consolidated their power

5. State-building issues, security, and taking care of one's own family usually were seen by most people and governments as more urgent priorities than promoting democracy.

The net result of these and other trends has been that security-minded governments and states dominated most aspects of life in Middle Eastern countries, external powers usually helped to perpetuate this autocracy and lack of democracy, and civil society and the private sector were largely contained and controlled by the state. Middle Eastern democrats have struggled unsuccessfully against these odds for many decades, just as their counterparts had done in the former Soviet bloc. But some improvements have occurred since the mid-1980s, when fiscal pressures forced most Arab regimes to loosen their grip on society; this trend continued in the early 1990s, after the collapse of communism impacted on the region.

The result has been an appreciable liberalization of political life in many countries, including legalization of new political parties, holding parliamentary elections, providing greater opportunities to oppose government positions, a more robust press, a larger role for the private sector, and expansion in the number and nature of non-governmental organizations and other civil society actors. The enthusiasm with which ordinary people throughout the region embraced the opportunities provided by the recent political liberalization indicates the strong thirst for more democratic and participatory governance systems in the region. Tens of thousands of new non-governmental organizations have been established in the region in the past two decades, along with hundreds of political parties and publications.

This has defused some of the tensions, frustrations, and pressures that had been building up within Arab countries, but in no case did it move any society towards a truly democratic system. The Arab region since the late-1980s has experienced a measurable improvement in freedom of expression and association, but political liberalization has not continued on the path towards full democratization. The ruling elites that have dominated Middle Eastern political life for the past half century continue to do so, with only superficial changes to their control of political, security, intellectual, cultural, and economic assets.

The tensions and concerns that drive the sentiments and actions of ordinary people throughout the Middle East have not changed very significantly in the past few decades. I would define these, in their order of importance, as:

1. Domestic indignities, reflecting political, economic, cultural and environmental pressures on the ordinary citizen, who feels that his or her voice is not heard in a society where power is unjustly exploited by a small, non-accountable elite
2. The humiliations and dangers suffered as a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict, which are widely felt emotionally and politically throughout the region
3. The legacy of foreign interventions in the area, whether by Europeans a century ago or by the USA today

All three of these issues have caused tens of millions of people throughout the region to agitate for a better, more responsive and more equitable order. Ordinary men and women have had few if any opportunities to express themselves, let alone to work for better governance. Most people have expressed their wishes in the language of religion or culture, speaking of their right to justice and dignity, rather than in the language of democratic republicanism. Dissatisfied Arabs whose citizenship rights have been routinely degraded have most often found refuge and hope in their religion or in their collective tribal and family identities, which have provided the sense of identity and the security and services that the modern state has not been able to provide.

The election results throughout the Middle East since the late 1980s, along with public opinion polls and the media, indicate clearly a strong desire for change among the publics of the region. The landscape for change and democracy in the Middle East is deep, rich and fertile, but it has never been cultivated by indigenous authorities or foreign powers.

Any effort to promote democracy in the Arab and wider Middle Eastern region must take these facts into consideration, acknowledge the mistakes of the past, understand the grievances and aspirations of the people of the region, and respond to indigenous concerns and hopes, rather than transplant foreign notions of what is right or what is needed. The US' policy in Iraq today unfortunately dampens indigenous Arab activism for democracy in the short run, given the strong anti-American sentiments in much of the Middle East. Local activists who seek to promote democracy face the new obstacle of being seen by some of their peers as unwitting agents of the United States. This is a terrible and bitter irony, given that Middle Eastern democracy activists have long wished to work with like-minded partners from the US and the West as a whole.

To achieve legitimate democratic orders in the Middle East, we must acknowledge several key realities and act accordingly, rather than forge policies that are driven either by extreme ideology or naïve romanticism. The single most important point that we must acknowledge is that the people of the United States and the Middle East share very common values and goals on issues such as a just society and good governance -- but they express them very differently. Four key differences should be kept in mind as we collectively seek to promote democracy in our region:

1. Americans probably value freedom above all other attributes, while most Arab societies stress the dignity of the individual more than his or her liberty. Dignity is defined and perceived as comprising the same range of values and rights that define democracy in the US and the Western world – participation in political life and decision-making, a sense of social and economic

justice, initial equal opportunities for all young people in their education and careers, and the rule of law applied equally and fairly to all in society.

2. Americans organize their society and governance primarily on the basis of the rights of the individual, while Arabs define themselves and their societies primarily through collective identities, such as family, tribe, ethnic group, or religion. Americans tend to stress society's obligation to ensure the individual's rights to do as he or she pleases, within the limits of the law; Arabs tend to focus more on the obligation of the individual to fulfill his or her responsibilities to the family and wider community.

3. The USA is a secular society, while religion plays an important public role in most Arab and Middle Eastern societies.

4. The United States is predominantly an immigrant society with a short collective historical memory, while Middle Eastern cultures are deeply defined by their historical memories and past experiences.

These four key differences between American and Arab culture have a major impact on how democracy could spread throughout our region. The term "democracy" itself needs to be defined carefully, given its largely Western tradition, though I believe we are all talking about the same broad concepts and values. We can speak of democracy, constitutionalism, republicanism, good governance, the rule of law, representative and accountable governance, participatory governance, or any other combination of words that reflect values we admire and seek to enjoy. One of the continuing mistakes of the past century – and the United States is now repeating the mistakes that Great Britain made in Iraq nearly a century ago – is that Western powers that enter the Middle East on the back of their military might tend to recreate Middle Eastern societies in their own Western image. Most of the parliaments, presidential systems, and even, in some cases, the very sovereign states that the British and French created in our region nearly a century ago have limped into this new century in poor shape, with limited credibility, relevance, or impact with their own people. One reason for this is that the people of the Middle East were rarely seriously consulted about the formation of their new countries after World War One. Another reason is that Western powers tried to copy their own institutions and mirror their own values in the Middle East, without sufficiently taking into account local realities such as those included in the four points I mentioned above. We may be witnessing this mistake once again in US policies in Iraq, whose good intentions are not always matched by effective implementation.

Rather than trying to replicate Western institutions in the Middle East or graft American institutions into Iraq, it would be much more effective and culturally acceptable to identify those shared values that define Middle Eastern and Western cultures, and work together to give those values life and institutional meaning in new governance systems. I know from my own life experience in the United States and the Arab World that Arabs and Americans broadly see eye-to-eye on the core principles and values that concern us -- such as the consent of the governed, majority rule and the protection of minority rights, accountability of those who hold public power, participation and consultation in the decision-making process, a sense of justice and equity for all, and pluralism in the social, religious and political order. We can all identify some quarters in the Middle East that do not share these views, but these are the exceptions that prove the rule.

I would urge the USA and any other foreign party that seeks to promote democracy in the Middle East to focus on promoting these kinds of principles and working to ensure that the peoples of the region have the opportunity to manifest these values in political structures and norms that are culturally comfortable and credible for them. The sad fact is, never in my generation have I witnessed an American government that worked hard for the principle of the consent of the governed in Arab lands. If this is to change, and the USA now plans to spearhead a democratic age in the Middle East, it would do well to start by consulting more closely with the people of the region, and forming partnerships for goals that are defined primarily by the citizens of those societies you wish to democratize. In other words, the best way to promote democracy in the Middle East is to be democratic in the way you go about trying to do this: consult, and don't dictate; achieve consensus, and don't issue ultimatums.

Perhaps the most common obstacle in the way of American hopes to promote democracy in the Middle East is the perception in the region of American double standards, on issues such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, implementation of UN resolutions, promoting democracy, and weapons non-proliferation. This suggests that the fastest way for the US to be accepted as a credible purveyor of democracy in the Middle East is to be much more consistent in its practical policies in the region. Simply stated, the US should apply the same standards in its policies abroad as it does at home. This will require greater sensitivity to local Middle Eastern cultural and religious values, and more consistency in promoting democratic values among all the countries of the region, including the ones that the US has long viewed as strategic allies that it has exempted from promoting democracy.

###