



Opening Statement
Senator Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
Hearing on the Greater Middle East Initiative
June 2, 2004

Mr. Chairman, promoting political, economic, and educational reform in the Muslim and Arab worlds is, in my judgment, a key to winning the war on terrorism. But it also warrants a healthy dose of humility.

Make no mistake, there is a war underway right now, but it is not a clash between civilizations as some would suggest.

Rather, it is a clash *within* the Arab and Islamic civilizations. And it pits the forces of reform, modernity, and tolerance against the forces of radical fundamentalism, regression, and violence.

We may be the terrorists' targets today, but their ultimate aim is not us – it is the vast majority of moderate Muslims. They will suffer most should the radicals gain ascendancy.

The radical vision is bleak. We saw it on full display in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, whose leaders persecuted minorities... denied education to women and girls... banned political activity... and institutionalized terrorism and violence.

Military, law enforcement, and intelligence tactics alone are not sufficient to defeat the radical fundamentalists.

We must also build an alliance of tolerance and progress with the moderate Muslim majority.

The radicals feed off the failures of governments, particularly in the Arab world, to open up political systems, to modernize education, and to build vibrant economies.

In 2002, Arab scholars completed a groundbreaking study of Arab Human Development.

It speaks to the need across the Arab world to make progress in three critical areas: empowering women, spreading knowledge, and expanding freedom.

This is an incredibly difficult challenge – but also an extraordinary opportunity.

For example, 70% of the Middle East's population is below the age of 30. Unlocking their minds and unleashing their talents can be a deep source of strength and progress.

Bringing women into the work place will boost Arab economies... just as *women* leaders past and present in Pakistan... in Bangladesh... in Turkey... and in Indonesia energized the Muslim world's politics.

This Committee has recognized the challenge. Last year, we passed my proposal to establish a Middle East Foundation to support civil society, a free press, women's rights, the rule of law, and educational reform.

I was pleased to see it included in the President's Fiscal 2005 budget. I look forward to working with the State Department to identify the resources to get the Foundation off the ground.

Mr. Chairman, you have an excellent proposal for a "Greater Middle East Twenty-first Century Trust." And Senator Hagel has introduced an important bill called the Greater Middle East and Central Asia Development Act.

Whatever the strength of our ideas for reform in the Arab and Islamic worlds, we cannot impose them on others, and we cannot advance them alone.

I am pleased that the Administration is working with our allies to support reform in the Arab and Muslim worlds. We also must work more closely with those in the region who are committed to reform – both inside and outside government.

Mr. Chairman, I do not have any problem with us placing reform prominently on the agenda of the Sea Island summit.

But I am baffled that the twin elephants in the room are not at the top of the agenda: Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Iraq, at present, is serving as more of a dead-weight on regional reform than it is a catalyst, as some had predicted.

Scheduling problems did not cause the leaders of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Tunisia to decline President Bush's invitation to Sea Island. And it's hard to make progress on reform without them.

Had the President decided to focus the summit on charting a new course in Iraq, I am confident that these leaders and others would have enthusiastically attended.

We also cannot hold reform hostage to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

But nor can we ignore the reality that the continuing conflict lets governments off the hook by giving them an excuse to drag their feet on reform. We must show sustained leadership on this issue.

I thank the Chairman and look forward to the testimony.