

DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS  
AND ISLAM IN THE MIDDLE  
EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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# DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND ISLAM IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Seminar Report

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Rights & Democracy

Centre international des droits de la personne et du développement démocratique  
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This report is based on a day-long experts' seminar held in Montreal on 22 March 2004. The discussion was based on 'Chatham House' rules.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The latest wave of democratisation has largely bypassed the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA). Lack of political reform and pluralism, repression, human rights violations, and socio-economic decay in many MENA countries remain regional and global challenges. There are a few notable exceptions and some societies are undergoing progressive reform. Nevertheless, we still need to address the crucial linkages between human rights and democracy on the one hand, and, on the other, current discourses and practices within Muslim countries.

These concerns were at the root of the Experts' Seminar held on 22 March 2004, in Montreal. The current Report emanates from the seminar discussion (based on 'Chatham House' rules). It is not a summary of key points, but an analytical presentation of the main ideas and arguments. The overarching objective of the Report is to provide an examination of the political dynamics in the MENA region from a human rights and democracy perspective. It seeks to provide information and analysis to policy makers and programming officers in both government institutions and civil society organisations – analysis that goes beyond the simple security framework and misguided assumptions about the region.

More specific themes discussed include: definitional issues (e.g. democracy, Islam, secularism), the domestic and international context, the socio-economic dimension in democracy building, its structures and institutions, and the role of civil society actors. During the Seminar, examples were drawn from various countries such as Morocco, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Iran and Turkey, and an entire session was devoted to the 'what is to be done?' question. The Report examines some of these cases in greater detail, and ends with a series of recommendations on both analytical and programming issues. It is hoped that these recommendations act as guides in policy making, and suggestions for follow up in pro-

gramming. Seminar participants came from civil society organisations, the academic and research communities, and Canadian government agencies.

Some of the key recommendations for activists, researchers and planners include:

- A citizens' watchdog group that can monitor human rights violations.
- Projects that bring together secularists and Islamists to minimise the rift between them through mutual dialogue and understanding.
- Engaging with moderate religious leaders, and incorporating them in the democratisation process.
- Incorporating traditionally excluded people into the reform process – e.g. women and minorities.
- Publishing civic education documents that are easily accessible to the general public about democracy, citizenship and human rights.
- Using a more integrative analytical approach – i.e. examining the inter-connections between state, civil society and NGOs.
- Emphasising economic rights as part of human rights and democracy.
- Interpreting human rights and democracy as part of local understandings and reflections, while taking into account gender, class dynamics and ethnic relations.

# INTRODUCTION

The global wave of democratisation at the end of the twentieth century has largely bypassed the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA). While authoritarian regimes were tolerated during the Cold War due to strategic interests, the stated emphasis in international politics in the post-Cold War era has been on the respect for human rights and democracy (even though in reality human rights issues have often remained in the realm of rhetoric). The September 11 attacks in the United States shifted global political dynamics once again. Not since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 had there been such a major shock in international affairs. The attacks led to a major realignment in the approach and policy of states, international organisations, and individuals. Overnight, it propelled the Middle East and the Muslim world into the very centre of global politics, and it certainly accentuated the relationship between security and democracy. Many analysts, policy makers and politicians in various capitals began to link the 'democratic deficit' in the Middle East and Muslim countries to security concerns and terrorism.

The new global context presents a new set of challenges for institutions and individuals working in the field of human rights and democratisation. For example, given the overwhelming emphasis on security, how do we ensure that a rights-based approach is reinforced globally, regionally, and nationally – including within Muslim countries? Many individuals, civil society organisations and government institutions in Canada and elsewhere are looking for answers, or, at the very least, suggestions.

The following discussion, based on an Experts' Seminar at Rights & Democracy in March 2004, attempts to provide some answers. It has one overarching objective: to analyse political dynamics in the MENA region from a human rights and democracy perspective. It seeks to provide information and analysis to policy makers and programming officers in

both government institutions and civil society organisations – analysis that goes beyond the simple security framework and misguided assumptions about the region.

The result of the Seminar is a series of recommendations addressing both analytical and programming issues. It is not enough to understand the current situation in MENA, but to also provide suggestions to meet the challenges ahead. It is hoped that these recommendations act as guides in policy making, and suggestions for follow up in programming. The participants at the Seminar included government officials, development researchers, university professors, and civil society activists (Appendix 1).

More specifically, topics covered in this Seminar Report include: definitional problems concerning democracy, Islam, secularism and human rights; the role of different actors in the process of democratisation (e.g. the state, civil society and diasporas); the impact of domestic and international dynamics; and the examination of different analytical perspectives. Finally, the Report ends with a list of recommendations offered by the participants for further work in rooting democracy in the MENA region.

# DEFINITIONS

Democratisation, human rights, Islam and even the 'Middle East and North Africa' are fluid terms and can have divergent meanings to different people. We should have clear definitions for each of these concepts to facilitate the discussion. Notions like political liberalisation and the perceived dichotomy between secularism and Islamic/Islamist movements are also important to examine. But *how* are definitions made? This is a central question that enables us to highlight various assumptions, and to include factors such as gender equality and economic well-being in our formulations. In this process, it is important to start with core universal ideas and values, and then build up a language that addresses the specific needs of different people in varying contexts. Through such an inclusive process people develop 'ownership' of a rights-based language as opposed to feeling that a foreign discourse is being imposed on them.

*Middle East and North Africa:* We should first of all clarify the boundaries of the region under discussion. Middle East and North Africa suggests a geographic area that is wider than the 'Arab world' and includes Turkey, Iran and Israel. But it is narrower than the 'Muslim world' because it excludes countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Pakistan. While it is important to keep in mind the wider Muslim context in the analysis of MENA, dynamics within this region are specific enough to merit a more focussed discussion. A comparative examination that includes the two non-Arab Muslim countries within MENA – Turkey and Iran – is particularly fruitful.

*Islam:* Should the term 'Islam' be used to refer to the world of Muslims? There are many different interpretations/understandings of Islam – both within and among the various countries. Hence, it is not useful to talk about Islam *per se*. We should rather be referring to Muslims, as groups of people, in order to avoid the essentialisation of Islam as a set of *fixed*

*Some argue that in the MENA region people working on democratisation and human rights should work through Islamic categories, concepts and terminology in order to promote the rights of underrepresented sectors in society. As such, their message will have resonance among the population.*

ideas. 'Muslims,' as a word, enables us to think of the variety of situations under which Muslim people live, reflecting the multitude of different understandings of Islam in different societies. However, there is a counterargument: talking about Islam, and engaging with the religion at the grassroots level is not essentialising it. In fact, some argue that in the MENA region people working on democratisation and human rights should work through Islamic categories, concepts and terminology in order to promote the rights of underrepresented sectors in society – e.g. women and minorities. As such, their message will have resonance among the population. It will also be more difficult for a human rights message rooted in Islam to be dismissed by fundamentalists claiming to have the only 'true' interpretation of Islam. Hence, the argument goes, we should indeed be talking of Islam as a daily reality and a religious practice. In sum, 'Muslim' and 'Islam' are not interchangeable terms. The first refers to a community of believers with all its diversity. The second, to a religious belief system and tradition that is dynamic, evolving, and multifaceted. Neither term should be 'essentialised.'

*Secularism:* The European Enlightenment-based secularism led to the separation of Church and State. In the Muslim world such a separation cannot take place, according to some analysts, as there is no equivalent to 'The Church' – with some exceptions, notably in certain elements of the *Shi'i* branch of Islam. We should therefore be focussing more on the separation of the religious and the political spheres of activity. Secularism is a negative definition insofar as it articulates a space *devoid* of religion (and it does not specify how this space should be filled). But, there is a significant amount of 'naturalised religion' in all societies, whether secular or not. For example, this is symbolically evident on the US Dollar: 'In God we trust' is imprinted on the most secular of state commodities – money. In Turkey, a country whose secular tradition is moulded on the French Jacobin model, religion did not 'disappear.' Rather, the state successfully controlled – until very recently – the access of the Islamists to the public space. Although we contrast 'secular' with 'religious' in our everyday language, it is important to keep in mind that in reality the contrast is not as sharp.

*Democracy:* Democracy is a continuous and dynamic process rather than a fixed or a final category. Democracy can only succeed when it is a local or a national project, not an imposed system of rule. It is not an exclusive Western 'import,' and it is not heresy within the Islamic tradition. De-

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mocratic values are based on universal values found in every cultural and religious tradition. As societies borrow ideas and practices from each other, and adapt them according to their context and needs, democracy can take many shapes and forms. The core principles around which Rights and Democracy constructs its working definition of democracy include:

- Full respect for all human rights, guaranteeing liberties to individuals, minorities, women, and excluded groups.
- Increased participation in the political process, particularly by civil society actors organised around democratic principles, entailing higher access to decision making.
- Promotion of a culture of tolerance, plurality and respect.
- Rule of law and access to justice by all.
- Indigenisation of democratic norms and principles.
- Good governance, including an open and fair electoral process.
- Security, social justice, and the socio-economic well being of people.

*Human rights:* Human rights are enshrined in the Universal Declaration, as well as subsequent international treaties and agreements. These rights – be they political, civil, economic, social or cultural – constitute values which safeguard human dignity, security and integrity. It should, nevertheless, be mentioned that on several occasions some seminar participants forcefully argued that *imposing* anything even in the name of human rights would be counterproductive in the MENA region. This is not a question of compromising core universal values or ‘negotiating’ the applicability of rights. Rather, it is a concern about method. The universality of rights is enhanced through local traditions, which are, in turn, enriched by a rights-based approach.



# ACTORS: STATE, CIVIL SOCIETY, DIASPORA AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Democracy and human rights are transformed from conceptual debates into concrete action by the work of various actors. Of course, certain structural variables exert significant pressures on actors. And yet actors – be they connected to the state, civil society or diasporan communities – are agents of change.

State-based actors in the MENA region attempt to control the democratic space within society. This is done through various mechanisms – from the enactment of laws to the level of repression practiced by state agents. Hence, the opening or closing of the democratic and human rights space is partially controlled from the ‘top,’ by state actors. However, this is only one side of the equation. The other side is the pressure from ‘below’ led by civil society agents. The activism of the latter often leads to the widening of the democratic space. Democratic development is not possible without civil society’s central role.

Most of the *formal* state institutions that are necessary for a democracy are present in the MENA countries: parliaments, electoral procedures, courts, and so on. However, the input of civil society actors is crucial if such institutions are to function in a democratic fashion. There are two reasons for this. First, state actors need to be kept in check by a vibrant civil society (which is relatively weak in many countries). Second, state institutions must be linked to wider society in a meaningful way, so that their

legitimacy is not undermined. Without the activism, educational role, and participation of an independent civil society, state institutions and actors remain 'suspended' above the general population rather than being linked in a democratic manner. Herein lies the first set of problems.

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In reality, most of the states in the MENA region are authoritarian. Repressive regimes view independent civil society activism as a threat to their hold on power and use oppressive measures to silence actors advocating democratisation and the respect for rights. For example, courts use unfair 'Laws of Association' to shut down or limit the activities of critical NGOs (as in Egypt), or police use brute force to silence individuals (as in Syria). Of course, many other measures are used, and there are significant variations from country to country. Some regimes (e.g. Morocco and Jordan) are much more tolerant than others. Where there is relative openness, actors mobilise to push for further reform and progressive change.

Civil society has always existed in the region, but under different forms. In the past, prior to the establishment of modern nation-states, services such as education and health were provided by civil society groups (e.g. charities). This traditional civil society lost some of its centrality as these and similar services were taken over and centralised by states. Such civil society actors (e.g. religious groups) still work in various domains providing mostly social benefits, but not in areas where there is competition with the state.

In contrast to traditional civil society activities, which do not challenge the state, new NGOs – often with external sources of funding – do challenge state policies and activities. For example, they provide suggestions and criticisms on the way schools are run, and what the national curriculum should include. More contentiously, they highlight human rights abuses and the gap between law and reality. When challenged in such ways, state actors often prefer to repress these NGOs as unwelcome competition rather than cooperate with them, or even tolerate them. In most cases, the new NGO activism has not evolved from the traditional civil society sector, and it is often unconnected to grassroots realities – which makes it less effective.

A second set of problems emanate from this tension. Not only are there many repressive states unconnected to civil society in the MENA region, many of the civil society actors pushing for democratic reform are themselves unconnected to the grassroots. Conversely, those who are rooted in

wider society do not sufficiently challenge the anti-democratic activities of the state.

A third set of problems relate to the fact that there are many different types of civil society associations: secular, religious, independent, government-created, etc. These distinctions must be understood in order to fully appreciate the dynamics within society, and between state and society. Most problematic are 'NGOs' which appear independent and claim to function as such, but in reality they are created and funded by governments, or by individuals very close to government.

Other groups of actors which influence developments in the region are diasporas. Diasporan communities have connections with their home countries, as well as various international organisations, governments, and networks. They lobby, raise funds, provide support and/or opposition. Sometimes the interests and activities of diasporan actors coincide with that of their 'kin-states.' Other times they are in conflict. Diasporas organise and mobilise around many issues, including the democratisation of their countries of origin. Some elements support persecuted activists, raising global awareness on the human rights conditions in their respective countries. For better or worse, the role of the Iraqi diaspora in the USA prior to the US invasion is a prime example of diasporan political activism.

Diasporas are not homogenous entities. Actors within a diasporan community have differing ideological, social and economic backgrounds and interests. For example, class divisions play an important role in the Iranian diaspora. Iranian communities abroad, especially in Canada and the USA, are largely composed of pro-Shah individuals which were exiled during the 1979 revolution. These 'westernised' individuals do not represent, in their values and politics, the majority of the people living in Iran, and yet they are the ones who often convey messages about Iran to the international community. In other cases, diasporas harbour fundamentalist movements which claim to represent the 'real' interests of the people in their home countries.

Finally, the international community is of course a significant actor. With the end of the Cold War, international relations are in the process of realignment. Major countries or blocs like Russia, China, the EU and the USA are renegotiating their positions and discernible patterns have emerged. MENA however, with all its diversity, does not have one clear direction. The outcome of the post-Cold War realignment is not yet clear

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in the region. One thing is nevertheless evident: direct US involvement has increased considerably in recent years, particularly with the 'War on Terror' and the invasion of Iraq. This direct military intervention has had a negative impact on other forms of more positive international involvement. The US attack on Iraq has particularly delegitimised international efforts to advocate human rights and democratisation in MENA, and more generally the Muslim world.

Even though a very small group of people are involved with terrorist activities, and an overwhelming majority of Muslims realise that terrorism does not advance their interests, the military attacks of the last two years by the US and its allies has produced a backlash against the discourse of democracy and human rights. These are viewed by many as 'Western ideas' that are being imposed on the region; consequently, sympathy for the Islamists is on the increase. More generally, the confrontational approach against fundamentalists is strengthening anti-democracy elements within some Muslim societies. George Bush's 'Axis of Evil' comment regarding Iran, for example, reinforced the conservatives' position in that country.

# PROBLEMS WITH DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL LIBERALISATION

There are a number of significant problems associated with the democratisation process in the MENA region.

First, as already alluded to, democracy itself is a very 'loaded' term. It has become a particularly problematic expression after the manner in which the US 'war on terror' has been fought in different Muslim countries, coupled with the 'Greater Middle East Initiative.' Many governments and individuals in the region equate the promotion of democracy with US foreign policy and its double-standards. It is seen as the latest phase of a centuries-long practice of externally imposed or induced political liberalisation and reform dictated from above. The shock of the Napoleonic conquest, for example, still remains a point of reference for Egyptians: it led to the modernisation efforts of Muhammad Ali, a period of weakness, and subsequent colonisation by the British. This left a significant scar in the Egyptian collective memory; liberalisation came to be associated with weak states, foreign intervention, corruption, and increasing gains for a bourgeois class often viewed as illegitimate by the rest of (traditional) society. These historically-rooted sentiments are reinforced by more recent political developments. For instance, Former President Anwar Sadat's *Infitah* reforms (i.e. the 'open door' economic liberalisation and privatisation policy instituted 1974 onwards) are associated with scandal and foreign control, as are contemporary reform policies demanded or inspired by external powers or agencies. As long as top-down reforms remain devoid of

meaningful liberties and the respect of the human rights of the local population, people continue to view them with suspicion, as extensions of foreign interests. The discourse of democracy becomes an empty shell, an ideology that is not rooted in indigenous interests.

Second, an important factor in the long-term survival of authoritarian regimes in MENA has been the implicit or explicit support granted by Western governments to these very regimes. In the name of stability, repressive and corrupt rulers have been propped up. This policy was further justified through some elements of modernisation theory: that political stability is required for economic development, after which democratic reform could take place. However, after decades of repressive (mis)rule, coupled with uneven economic development, there is no stability in the region. The young population – constituting the majority of the people in MENA – no longer tolerate living under such authoritarian systems. They want change. A few turn to violence, and fundamentalist answers. In this respect too the events of September 11 were ‘a wake-up call’ for leaders and policy makers in Western capitals, particularly in the US. They realised that their old assumptions and policies had failed; that there is a need for a new approach centred around democratic development and reform. If such a policy approach is implemented in an honest and nuanced manner, it will lead to a win-win situation: Muslim countries will benefit from democratisation, as will the US, Europe, and other Western countries. Put differently, *how* such reform is implemented is of crucial importance to its success or failure. Supporting dictators while talking of democratic reform does not work.

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Third, the Palestinian question has been used as an excuse by authoritarian regimes to stifle demands for democracy. It has become a convenient way for some governments to deflect criticism away from internal problems as they claim that such criticism weakens their political struggle against Israel on the international scene. The argument implies that domestic reforms must be delayed until the Palestinian Cause is solved. But this *excuse* against democratisation in the name of resisting Israeli occupation is wearing thin. Civil society mobilisation, democratic reform, and the respect for human rights are not inherently related to the Israel-Palestine conflict. For example, in Syria, where independent civil society activism is beginning to emerge very slowly, there is no connection between calls for reform and the Palestinian question. On the contrary, there is universal opposition to Israeli policies. And yet, the regime still utilises

a discourse of war to justify the repression of independent activists. However, there is a valid point in the criticisms regional actors level at the international community. It is pointed out that the occupation of Palestinian lands by Israel is de facto accepted by many Western powers, and the abuse of Palestinian rights mildly condemned, if condemned at all. And yet, the same powers advocate democracy and call for the respect of human rights in the rest of MENA. This double standard undermines Western, particularly US, discourse and policies on the promotion of democratic reform in Muslim countries. The situation in Palestine/Israel should neither be used by authoritarian regimes to legitimate lack of reform, nor should it be treated hypocritically by the Western world – after all, it remains a major concern in the region.

Fourth, the association of secularism with democracy presents a challenge in many Muslim societies. The legitimacy of the democratic system is undercut because it is perceived to be ‘un-religious’; the separation of ‘church’ and ‘state’ in democratic systems, as well as the fact that democracies allow individuals the right not to follow religious traditions (or to even change religions), is cited as ‘evidence.’ For traditional Islamists, such rights undermine the religious character of society. The secularisation-democratisation nexus does pose a problem for current democracy activists, even though this has not always been the case.

A more specific analysis of the evolution of the Egyptian feminist movement mirrors this tension, and it demonstrates in concrete terms what seems to be an abstract issue. Secularism did not necessarily have a negative connotation in wider society under British rule. The colonial administration had left a social space open – i.e. unconquered – in which religious activism could take place. As people united and mobilised against British occupation, this secular social space was filled with activists of many kinds, co-existing and collaborating with one another, including secular feminists of various strands (e.g. some working through the humanitarian discourse, others through the ‘reform within Islamic discourse’). Whereas men in this period drew a clear distinction between the secular and the religious realms, women utilised a more intertwined discourse, drawing together these two realms. However, secular feminism came to an impasse when it had to deal with a fundamental contradiction: even though all Egyptians were considered equal in the public sphere, this was clearly not the case in the private sphere. The personal status law could not be changed because of the strength of the patriarchal

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system. At the same time, society as a whole was further 'Islamising' and, in this process, many individuals were beginning to question the need for an independent secular socio-economic space. By the 1990s, another strand of feminism had emerged – in Egypt and elsewhere in MENA – that of Islamic feminism. This feminism bases its arguments in religious sources such as the *Kur'an*, *Tafsir* (the body of texts interpreting Islam) and *Ijtihad* (interpretation of the oral tradition often used by jurists). But it also goes a step further. Whereas the secular feminists were using the existing *Ijtihad* (e.g. of Muhammad Abduh), Islamic feminists engage in their own *Ijtihad* – an activity made possible through the inclusion of women in the Al-Azhar Islamic University in Egypt. These Islamic feminists argue for equality both in the private and public spheres. And their movement is not confined to Egypt. Similar arguments and activism exist in Iran as well (e.g. the work of the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi and her colleagues). These examples are indicative of the complex relationship between democracy and rights on the one hand, and secularism on the other. Is democracy and the human rights system it seeks to protect always predicated on secularism? A women's rights movement emanating from the Islamic tradition challenges conceptions of democracy that are based on the European secular model.

At this point, a word of caution is necessary. The above arguments are broadly framed, and hence should be taken with a grain of salt. Any kind of generalisation is problematic, whether it is about 'democracy' or 'dictatorship.' When a term like 'democratisation' is used to refer to – or to justify – a whole gamut of foreign and military policy initiatives, it loses its rightful meaning. Similarly, generalising statements such as 'there is no democracy in the region' are not productive. There always are counterexamples to any such claim. In fact, many countries in MENA do have certain democratic institutions and limited democratic practices. A more informed analysis demonstrates that there are different types of regimes or models of governance in the region. For example:

**Iran:** a regime based on revolutionary Islam caught in its own contradictions, and currently deadlocked between reformists and conservatives. It regularly abuses human rights, and yet regular elections are held and certain social rights are protected.

**Turkey:** a state found on radically secular principles which is now governed by an Islamic-rooted political party. The most democratic Muslim country in the region.

**Morocco and Jordan:** Arab states that are 'opening up' and democratising, even though they still face serious obstacles.

**Syria and Saudi Arabia:** countries where opposition to the regime is severely repressed, and human rights abuses are widespread.

**Egypt and Yemen:** 'in-between' countries which are not truly democratic, but do have some openings for an autonomous civil society and democratic practices.

**Israel:** a democracy for its Jewish citizens, but an occupying power over Palestinian territories, as well as repressive and discriminatory towards its Arab subjects.

In addition to this broad categorisation, there are also many other differences: monarchies, republics, elected governments, self-appointed rulers, religious and secular laws, market and state controlled economies, etc. Without a full appreciation of these differences, and how they impact democracy and human rights, it is impossible to effectively work in the region. Any specific programme in any MENA country has to take the local specificities into account if it is to be effective.



# THE ECONOMIC 'VERSUS' CULTURAL EXPLANATIONS

Analyses of the MENA region often suffer from two types of simplification: the relationship between economic issues and political reform is either ignored or minimised due to an overemphasis on religious and cultural aspects, or, alternatively, a direct line is drawn between poverty and religious radicalism.

People in the former school of thought argue that there is no direct or prevailing link between economic development and democracy, and, therefore, no direct causal relationship between economic underdevelopment and the emergence of radicalism or terrorism. The answer, they point out, must be sought elsewhere: in cultural explanations, the nature of Islam, political dynamics and the policies of the elite, etc. Analysts in the latter school of thought believe that the greatest barrier to democratisation is poverty and economic regression or maldevelopment. Hence the roots of terrorism can only be eliminated through economic progress.

There is some truth in both of these approaches. While it is true that many of the recruits willing to die in the name of Islam do come from underprivileged classes, Islamic political movements do not simply emerge from economic alienation and hopelessness. Their ideologues have generally come from middle or upper class families.

Similarly, the failure of democracy in the MENA region cannot be explained through a single monocausal factor – be it culture, politics, the economy, class, or the role of key individuals. Such approaches are reductionist and unsatisfactory in their explanations, not to mention dangerous

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in their prescriptions. The simplistic modernisation theory of the past that focussed primarily on economic factors 'prescribed,' for instance, abandoning traditional culture for the sake of economic development. The outcome in many countries was cultural alienation *and* the lack of development. On this view, Islam was seen as the barrier to development, and change was to be instituted by a new secular class which aspired to be 'Western.' As a result, a system emerged which disproportionately benefited the urban middle class, at the expense of the rural population and the poor, leading to mass discontent. One example: it was the urban middle class women who almost exclusively benefited from the education policy of the Shah of Iran. Only after the Islamic revolution of 1979 did lower class women in cities and the countryside benefit from literacy classes and a wider access to education.

It is therefore crucial to analyse the interaction between different factors – e.g. how economic policies affect the political process (and vice versa), how cultural symbols and interpretations relate to mobilisation, how key individuals institute change while being confined by structural realities, etc. Not all of these dynamics can be explained here due to the lack of space, but the complexity of the situation can be extrapolated from an in-depth examination of a specific case – that of Turkey – which highlights the economic dimension.

### **The Economic Dimension: The Turkish Case**

It is relatively easy to make the link between economic factors and Islamic radicalism in cases like Algeria, with an approximately 40% official unemployment rate (but a striking 85% among the 25 to 35 age group). But the argument becomes more difficult in places like Saudi Arabia; despite some recent economic difficulties and increased poverty in some sectors, it remains a tremendously wealthy society. In countries with large informal economies, the role of religious institutions is also notable, insofar as employment and social services are often mediated through Mosques and related networks. There are clear links between these services and political mobilisation – be it moderate or radical.

A nuanced and historically informed analysis of the Turkish case study provides a comprehensive example encompassing many of these issues. It goes beyond straight-forward linkages, and provides a more positive pic-

ture in connecting Islam, political mobilisation, a secular(ising) state, and democratisation.

In the formative phase of modern Turkey, a national secular bourgeoisie played a pivotal role. It became the developmental partner of the state, which in itself was largely controlled by the military. The latter ensured the survival of the secular(ising) system, and played a role – directly or indirectly – in economic development. But it also abused human rights and prevented democratic development when it was against its interests, or the interests of the state as *it defined it*. Consequently, the fruits of economic growth (as uneven or cyclical as it was) were mostly enjoyed by the secularist forces in society.

The initial decades of the republic, 1920s onward, were also the years of forced westernisation. As part of this process, various democratic structures were introduced, but they remained 'rootless' – suspended above society, ineffective, and often meaningless in practice. Attempts to create a true multi-party system failed. Religion – which was pushed exclusively to the private sphere by the single party system and the secularisation of practically the entire public sphere – could simply not be ignored, or wished away as a political or social force. Whenever there was a political opening, religious parties and/or civil society organisations emerged. They were often banned, but re-emerged under a different name.

*The failure of radical secularisation at the mass level, coupled with the adoption of neo-liberal policies by the state, led to the emergence of Islamic political parties. Because there already existed a formal state-based institutional framework through which these organisations could operate, and a semi-free media, they could channel their efforts into peaceful activism.*

As long as the state and its secularist allies controlled the economy, there was not much room for others to challenge the system, and to question its radical secularism. The liberalisation of the economy, and of media, beginning in mid-1980s provided the impetus for considerable change in the political and economic landscape of Turkey. Small and medium-size businesses, especially in Anatolia, began to deal directly with EU and US markets, bypassing the intermediation of the state and the established bourgeoisie. That is, they broke free of the control of the secular elite, including the state. These entrepreneurs, comprising an 'alternative' middle class much more traditional in its values and religiously inclined, are the core constituency of the religious party in Turkey. In short, the liberalisation of the economy led to a more plural political system; voices and organisations that were silenced in the past came to be included. These were primarily – but not exclusively – religious voices. However, the political 'opening up' also included further ethno-cultural (i.e. Kurdish) political activism, as well as civil society mobilisation on human rights issues. Much of this overall democratisation is underpinned by the elite's

desire to join the European Union (despite the scepticism of the military establishment).

The failure of radical secularisation at the mass level, coupled with the adoption of neo-liberal policies by the state, led to the emergence of Islamic (or Islamic-rooted) political parties. Because there already existed a formal state-based institutional framework through which these organisations could operate (courts, parliament, a political party system), and a semi-free media, they could channel their efforts into peaceful activism; first to claim some 'ownership' of these institutions from the secular elite, and then to use them in implementing their policies. The outcome was a more moderate discourse, and, a relatively peaceful path to political Islam. Violence could be rejected because it was not the only option left; the opening from the top, and the pressure from below met on the plane of existing state institutions which had just enough flexibility to mediate the tension.

The Islamic movement in Turkey, as well as similar groups elsewhere, capitalise on the failings of the state to provide social services by providing it themselves (Ironically, the IMF and the World Bank thus become indirect but important actors in the rise of Islamic movements!). It is no coincidence that the Islamist party that came to share power in Turkey in 1995 was called the Welfare Party, and the movement's entry point into national politics was success at the municipal level (where they were effective in distributing government services). Similarly, it is not surprising that the incapacity of the Iranian state to provide adequate services after the revolution led to Mosque-based programmes in education, health care, and housing. However, in Iran, Khomeini explained and justified his social justice programme through the *Kur'an* and other religious texts and practices. For example, he used the concept of *Jihad* in the economic reconstruction of the country.

The Turkish case or other examples are not being cited here as models to be emulated, but to show the complexity of the situation, and the intertwined nature of various dynamics at play: economic policies, religious mobilisation, institutional framework, political democratisation, etc. The point is not that neoliberalism leads to democracy (similar policies elsewhere have had very anti-democratic consequences), but that these factors are all connected and must be analysed on a case by case basis. The focus on the economic dimension highlights one set of factors. The next section analyses the other side of the equation: the cultural aspects.

## The Cultural Dimension: Islam and Democracy

The marginalisation of Islam by secular reformist leaders has had a negative impact on the democratisation movement, according to some scholars. In their drive to westernise, leaders in MENA have instead augmented religious fundamentalism by contributing to the perception that Islam is under threat. Even today, some secular intellectuals and policy makers in the Muslim world argue that Islam as a whole is inherently against democracy, human rights and women's rights. When Islam is essentialised, simplified, and treated in such a dismissive and critical matter, it is no surprise that the community of believers develops antagonistic attitudes towards democracy – as a foreign ideology espoused by 'inauthentic' westernised individuals. Unfortunately, a situation has currently emerged in which many people in the Muslim world believe that they have to *choose* between Islam and democracy.

*Islam and democracy are not incompatible either/or choices. In fact, not only democratic values and practices are compatible with the Islamic tradition, they are required by Islam, as certain interpretations of the concepts of Shura, Ijma, Vak'f, and Bay'a demonstrate.*

This approach is erroneous, both at the levels of theology and strategy. Islam and democracy are not incompatible either/or choices. In fact, not only democratic values and practices are compatible with the Islamic tradition, they are *required* by Islam, as certain interpretations of the concepts of *Shura* (consultation), *Ijma* (consensus), *Vak'f* (associational groups or charity) and *Bay'a* (public display of support or just opposition to a leader) demonstrate. Presenting Islam and democracy as opposing choices is also counterproductive at the strategic level. When facing a choice between a political system and a deeply held religious identity, most people in MENA would choose to keep their Islamic identity. It is also a mistake to project all resistance to authoritarianism as Islamic fundamentalism – a strategy eagerly (mis)used by some MENA regimes and to demonize political Islam in its totality without any regard for differences. Such misguided strategies might lead to short term successes, but in the long run they are counterproductive as they unify, radicalise, and popularise movements who come to see violence as the only option. In sum, the correct equation is Islam *and* democracy, not Islam *or* democracy.

This leads us to the question of *Ijtihad*, or interpretation, in the Islamic tradition. As long as an outdated interpretation of Islam remains prevalent in the MENA region, democracy will be contrasted with the Islamic tradition by many religious figures and community leaders. What is needed is an ongoing *Ijtihad*, similar to the early years of Islam, that is in tune with its contemporary world, and addresses key issues relating to

democracy and human rights. For example, *Ijtihad* was used in a progressive manner in dealing with the question of polygamy in Tunisia. Similarly, as mentioned, Islamic feminists in Egypt use *Ijtihad* to advance rights.

*Ijtihad*, just like social activism and political choices, both reflects, and affects, the cultural context in which it takes place. For any kind of reform to be meaningful and long term, it needs to be rooted in the culture of a given society – the Islamic tradition in this case. For it is through culture (entailing religion) that people make sense of their daily lives, and of their politics. If political liberalisation and reform in MENA countries are to be more than façades to placate the US, the EU or other external forces, they need to entail cultural change, especially that of political culture. Of course, this is easier said than done. It requires much time, and it does entail reforms at many other levels (institutional, economic, civil society, to name a few).

In an open and democratic culture, interconnected with progressive Islamic interpretations of politics and human rights, arguments based on fear and 'blackmail' are difficult to sustain. Hence, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's claim that every time liberalisation is attempted, the country risks 'Algernisation' will not be accepted by the population. Similarly, people will question the logic behind 'dynastic republics' where sons take over control of the state from their fathers (as it happened in Syria, and is a possibility in Egypt and Yemen). Arbitrary rule, corruption, abuse of power and violence go against the ideas of *Shura*, *Ijma*, and *Bay'a*. It is somewhat ironic that reforming monarchies in MENA, namely Jordan and Morocco, are showing the way to a cultural change that accepts pluralism, democracy, and the centrality of human rights. This is a slow process, but it does bring the country closer to the rule of law.

The example of Turkey shows that when Islamic movements enter the arena of relatively open politics, they tend to lose their extremist edge (in the Turkish case, the 'postmodern coup d'État' against the Welfare Party in 1997 also had a major role in this). The dynamism built in the interpretive process of Islamic tradition and culture enables this kind of shift to take place. 'Second generation' Islamists in Turkey – the Justice and Development Party (AKP) – also demonstrate the successful marriage between traditional values and modern practices. AKP uses the latest technology in keeping a computerised database of its electorate, and local branches conduct surveys every six months on current attitudes, report-

ing the results to headquarters so that public opinion can be incorporated into policy making more directly and effectively. It is through such modern practices and strategies, coupled with political messages that address socio-economic needs, as well as the religio-cultural values (and anxieties) of the people, that AKP managed to get over 34% of the vote in the general elections of 2002. Islamic fundamentalists constitute around 5-7% of the population in Turkey. It is the moderate Islamists that are popular. Interestingly, 40% of those who voted for the AKP were first time voters, and 70% of AKP voters had not voted for religious parties in the past.

In neighbouring Iran, where there is an Islamic state, there also is a process of moderation, or deradicalisation (at least at the popular level), but coming from the other direction. The Islamic revolution seems to be running out of steam while a 'quiet' social and cultural revolution is taking place. As conservatives re-assert their control over the political process, society as a whole seems to be moving in the opposite direction: there has been a considerable decline in fertility rates, a tremendous increase of women in higher education, noteworthy questioning of clerical rule, and considerable voter apathy (especially in Tehran). This tension will define Iranian politics in the next few years.

The relationship between Islam and democracy is a complex one. The economic and cultural dimensions are two of the more significant aspects that must be examined in order to understand the MENA region. However, the complexity of the analysis must not deter us from advocating change. We should rather use such analysis to put forth realistic, well informed, and locally rooted recommendations for progressive change.



# CONCLUSION: HOPE FOR CHANGE

The impetus for change in the MENA region is coming from many directions: from within individual countries, from regional organisations, and from outside forces (US, EU, international organisations). However, if democratic reform is to be genuine and long-lasting, local civil society must be 'on board.' State sponsored initiatives are of course important (Morocco and Jordan demonstrate this), but to succeed, they must find a strong resonance in civil society. Without this support from below, anti-reform elements within the state and the ruling elite can hamper reform (as it happened in Syria soon after Bashar Asad assumed power in 2000).

*The Alexandria Declaration, along with other less public initiatives, provide hope for democratic change in the MENA region. The key question, and the main challenge, is how to put in operation the lofty ideals of such declarations. The answer almost always lies at the national level of every country.*

Hence, activities such as the 'Alexandria Declaration' by Arab intellectuals and civil society actors meeting in Egypt (March 2004) are significant initiatives. The Declaration called for political, social, economic and cultural reform in the Arab world; notably, it demanded the freedom of political prisoners, a multi-party political system, an open media, peaceful changes in political power emanating from free and fair elections, transparency in public life, and a number of other significant freedoms based on universal human rights. The Declaration urged all Arab governments to modernise the Arab Charter for Human Rights, and to be signatories to international human rights agreements, including all international conventions on the rights of women. The Alexandria Declaration, along with other less public initiatives, provide hope for democratic change in the MENA region. The key question, and the main challenge, is how to put in operation the lofty ideals of such declarations. The answer almost always lies at the national level of every country.

We also have to deal with the Iraqi counterexample. The US occupation is a fait accompli. In this case, the challenge is how to work for the en-

trenchment of democracy and human rights in Iraq without legitimising the war and the occupation of the country in the eyes of the Iraqi people. Some experts and activists believe that the invasion was justified as it got rid of a tyrant. Others are strongly against it, citing its dubious legal reasoning, the innumerable human rights abuses after the invasion, not to mention the death and destruction caused by the war. But all share the view that the ultimate goal should be a democratic Iraq that respects human rights. As the country slips more and more into chaos, we should resist the temptation to dismiss it as a 'lost cause,' but rather focus on strategic opportunities which would help the enhancement of human rights. For example, the constitution making process provides openings through which minority rights (with veto power) can be protected; it also introduces a discourse of individual rights into the political system, and works toward a framework based on which democratic institutions could develop in the future (e.g. political parties, press freedom). None of this is meant to minimise the severe negative consequences of the war, but to emphasise the need to continue with human rights work.

Finally, many models are being touted as potential 'solutions' for Iraq. But the reality is that no model can be transplanted to Iraq: not the Lebanese confessional model, not Canadian or US federalism, not the Westminster system, not the French Jacobin state. Iraqis need to devise their own unique system, based on their local realities. Civil society participation is crucial in this. Democracy can take many forms, and it can combine various elements from many systems. The task is to support *Iraqi* efforts to build their society anew, from the rubble it has been reduced to. Only then will democracy and human rights have some resonance rather than appear as impositions.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Two sets of recommendations emerged from the Experts' Seminar. One set relates to programming, the other to research, analysis and methodology. These recommendations are for the consideration of activists, policy makers, programming officers and researchers – be they government officials or civil society actors concerned with human rights and democratisation.

## On Programming

*Support the establishment of citizens' watchdog groups in region.* These can monitor human rights abuses (and improvements), complimenting the work of international human rights organisations.

*Support the revision of the Arab Charter of Human Rights* – a process that has already begun, but requires further input from local civil society.

*Emphasise civic education.* Publish easily accessible documents about democracy, human rights, citizenship and other related topics.

*Create neutral spaces that could act as fora for discussion* among individuals who usually do not encounter each other's views in a constructive (i.e. non-ideological) manner – e.g. between secularist and Islamist activists. Initial meetings can take place in a third country where there is a more detached environment (e.g. Canada).

*Engage moderate Muslim religious leaders* into processes that bring Islam and democracy together, demonstrating that democracy is not *Kufr* (blasphemy).

*Devise an exchange programme* that brings activists to the region from other successfully democratised countries who can talk about their experiences (e.g. from Eastern Europe).

*Incorporate economic, social and cultural rights into programming*, paying particular attention to the consequences of economic globalisation. A rights-based approach in such policy areas as economic aid and military support can be very effective.

## **On Research, Analysis and Methodology**

*Undertake locally grounded and objective research* prior to any programming decision. This not only entails involving regional partners in projects, but broadening our own conceptions of democracy and rights in a more culturally inclusive and hence less 'imposing' manner.

*Develop a more integrative analytical approach* that examines the *interconnections* between state and civil society. This facilitates the development of a mediation framework between the two, without idealising civil society as the *a priori* hub of democracy.

*Integrate class, ethnicity, and gender in analytical frameworks* that remain blind to these dynamics. The problem of 'voice' requires particular attention – i.e. including the perspectives of groups who are often excluded from public debates and politics.

*Examine contemporary ideological currents in the West*. Proper two-way dialogue implies self-critique, particularly regarding our own assumptions regarding Islam, democracy and human rights. The undermining or violation of certain rights by Western governments in the name of security, as well as Christian fundamentalism, are two areas requiring specific attention.

*Maintain a long-term perspective*. The tradition of open and public dialogue, democracy building, and the emergence of a human rights culture have long gestation periods. These processes should begin at the level of ideas, and then move to the level of actual politics.

# APPENDIX I

## List of Seminar Participants

Akouété <b>AKAKPO-VIDAH</b>	Rights & Democracy
Iris <b>ALMEIDA</b>	Rights & Democracy
Abdullahi Ahmed <b>AN-NAIM</b>	Emory University
Rachad <b>ANTONIUS</b>	UQAM
Sami <b>AOUN</b>	Université de Sherbrooke
Lara <b>ARJAN</b>	Rights & Democracy
Michael <b>ATTALLAH</b>	DFAIT/ PCO
Margot <b>BADRAN</b>	Northwestern University
Roksana <b>BAHRAMITASH</b>	Concordia University
Ariane <b>BRUNET</b>	Rights & Democracy
James <b>DEVINE</b>	McGill University
El Obaid Ahmed <b>EL OBAID</b>	McGill University / UNDP
Roula <b>EL-RIFAI</b>	IDRC
Geneviève <b>GASSER</b>	CIDA
Fatma Muge <b>GOCEK</b>	University of Michigan
Fadi <b>HAMMOUD</b>	Université de Montréal
Zeynep <b>KADIRBEYOGLU</b>	McGill University
Vicken <b>KOUNDAKJIAN</b>	DFAIT/ PCO
Fayaz S. <b>MANJI</b>	DFAIT
Sevak <b>MANJIKIAN</b>	Vanier College / McGill University
Radwan <b>MASMOUDI</b>	Centre for the Study of Islam & Democracy

Razmik <b>PANOSSIAN</b>	Rights & Democracy
Pedram <b>PIRNIA</b>	CIDA
Chrystiane <b>ROY</b>	DFAIT
Jean-Louis <b>ROY</b>	Rights & Democracy
Pamela <b>SCHOLEY</b>	IDRC
Jawad <b>SKALLI</b>	Rights & Democracy
Isabelle <b>SOLON HELAL</b>	Rights & Democracy
Emre <b>UNLUCAYAKLI</b>	McGill University
Ann <b>FLANAGAN WHALEN</b>	DFAIT

# APPENDIX II

## Seminar Programme - 22 March 2004

**9:00-9:15** Welcome and Introductions

Jean-Louis Roy, President, Rights and Democracy

**9:15-12:00** **Session 1 – Challenges and Opportunities: The Complexities of the Middle East and Democratic Development**

Chair: Razmik Panossian, Rights and Democracy

*Topic 1: The Domestic Political Situation*

Sami Aoun, Professor, University of Sherbrooke

*Topic 2: The International Context*

Radwan Masmoudi, President, Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy

*Topic 3: Socio-economic and Cultural Factors*

Rachad Antonius, Professor, UQAM

10:15-10:30 Coffee/tea break

10:30-12:00 Discussion

12:00-13:00 Lunch

**13:00-15:45** **Session 2 – Rooting Democracy in the Middle East**

Chair: Pamela Scholey, IDRC

*Topic 4: Definitions*

Margot Badran, Senior Fellow, Georgetown University

*Topic 5: Structures and Institutions*

Muge Goçek, Professor, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

*Topic 6: Actors*

Roksana Bahramitash, Researcher, Concordia University

14:00-14:15 Coffee/tea break:

14:15-15:45 Discussion:

15:45-16:00 Coffee/tea break:

**16:00-17:00 Session 3: What is to be done? Round table Discussion**

Chair: Ariane Brunet, Rights and Democracy

**17:00-17:10 Concluding Remarks**

Iris Almeida, Rights and Democracy

**19:00-21:00 Keynote Speaker (notes not included in this report)**

Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, School of Law, Emory University

'Islam, Secularism and the Democratisation of the Middle East'

Chair: Peter Leuprecht, Professor, McGill Faculty of Law

Concluding Remarks: Jean-Louis Roy, President, Rights and Democracy