

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE
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Elizabeth Dugan
Vice President
International Republican Institute
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Introduction

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, I want to begin my statement today by thanking you for the opportunity to testify and commending you for convening this subcommittee hearing. From the standpoint of the International Republican Institute's (IRI) work in the region, I can tell you that it is crucial for democracy's expansion that Congress continues to focus its attention on this issue.

Like many other organizations, IRI has been giving more and more attention to the issue of democracy in the Middle East since the events of September 11, 2001. This effort amplifies programs undertaken for the last dozen years; indeed, IRI's first involvement in the region began in Kuwait, immediately after the first Gulf War. Throughout the 1990s, IRI also undertook democracy work in Oman, Morocco and the West Bank.

But since 9/11, the United States has given the topic of Middle Eastern democracy a new level of sustained attention and has buttressed that attention with additional resources. The questions you have posed to us as witnesses today allow us to examine how effectively that attention and those resources are being used.

Lessons Learned

But before we look ahead it may be important to look back and embrace at least two lessons learned.

The first lesson is about democracy and security. The U.S. Government's thinking on democracy and human rights turned an important corner after 9/11, and President Bush articulated the shift in his powerful speech at the commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) when he said, "Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe – because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty." With these words, he underscored that our commitment to freedom and reform in the region was serious. And that commitment is reinforced nearly daily, not only through his vision, but through the strategic programs, such as the U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), that define the policy, and through organizations like IRI

that mold the policy into action. We will not retreat from this action, and in fact are reinvigorated to pursue it by reminders, like that of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice last month, that our past support for non-democratic leaders led not to stability, but to malignancy ... malignancy that led young men to fly planes into the Pentagon and the World Trade Center.

The second lesson is about democracy and Islam. In the early 1980s in Latin America, as the NED family was being established, skeptics said democracy was not possible in Central and South America because of an ingrained sense of servitude in the minds of Latins. In the late 1980s in East Asia, similar "expert theories" were readily being tossed about Washington. Back in the 1920s, when Catholic democracy collapsed in southern Europe and Latin America, political scientists began to theorize that only Protestant northern European countries were capable of democracy. Today, no one would put forward such a notion, yet skepticism about the basic compatibility between democracy and Islam can still be heard in the corridors of Washington.

For IRI, the question is settled: Islam, the faith of one fifth of the world's population, is consistent with democratic rule. From our years of work in predominantly Muslim countries like Indonesia and Bangladesh and Turkey, we have seen this, and I fully expect that we will look back on the issue of democracy and Islam in the years to come and see that many of the questions being raised about the two are as wrong-minded as those theories dating back to the European, Latin American and East Asian examples.

Our work in Iraq further confirms this belief. Against a background of persistent violence orchestrated by a relatively tiny minority of extremists, the vast majority of Iraqis steadfastly support the electoral processes and the establishment of a constitutionally-based, elected government.

In Iraq, the skeptics said Iraqis would never participate in an election organized by the U.S. military. The skeptics said the security situation was too dangerous for people to leave their homes. And the skeptics said that insurgents would have a field day attacking polling stations and voters. But the world watched in January as some eight million Iraqi voters turned out to participate in the country's first democratic election in more than 30 years.

While a great deal of hard work still remains, including drafting a new constitution and forming a permanent government, Iraqis are firmly committed to the transition from an authoritarian regime to democratic government.

How do we know this? In a recent national public opinion poll conducted by IRI, 90 percent of Iraqis said they believe that it is "very important" or "important" that their new constitution allow for the ability to select and change their government through peaceful and fair elections. Similarly, 87.2 percent of those polled advocate keeping some type of quota for women's representation in the new National Assembly as a means of securing roles for women in the new government.

Evidence of Change

These numbers may surprise some observers, but to those on IRI's staff working daily in the region, they demonstrate that not only is democracy compatible with Islam, democracy is the aspiration of the people. That's not just what we think. It's what they think. And it's what they want.

Images of Iraqis walking to the polls were visible on satellite television from Morocco to Malaysia. And though the election was not without its flaws, the impact of this historic event seems to be reverberating across the region and imbuing local reformers with hope and courage ... in places like Lebanon, where the opposition has been emboldened by recent events in both Iraq and Ukraine ... and in Egypt, where opposition rallying around the banner of *Kafiya* – or “enough” – has been more vocal in its demands for reform than at any point during the last decade, and where President Mubarak's recent announcement to allow for competitive presidential elections serves as an initial but important step in the right direction.

In early January this year, the Middle East witnessed the most free and competitive leadership election ever held in the region to elect new Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. Voters turned out in respectable numbers, despite the many challenges posed to the movement by Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. After its passage of a constitution in 2003, Qatar is expected to hold elections for a National Assembly by universal suffrage. Morocco is considering a new political party law that is being widely and openly debated and enjoys input from the political parties. Jordan is enacting changes to the way municipal government works to make local councils fully elected bodies.

And the list goes on.

This isn't to say that significant challenges to advancing democracy don't remain in the Middle East or to suggest that recent accomplishments would not have happened were it not for U.S. involvement. But the prospect of democratic governance in Islamic countries is really no longer an abstract debate: Democratic advances are occurring. Muslims in the Middle East are participating in democratic processes. And it's all happening swiftly.

Implementing Reforms

With respect to supporting political, economic and social reform in the Middle East, the Bush Administration has selected the proper course. President Bush has removed the taboo of talking about and pressing for democratic reform in the Middle East. This increased attention to reform, democracy and human rights – in words and deeds – does help reformers in the Middle East committed to democratic change. And it gives organizations like IRI more muscle and more momentum to support them.

Even with the support, the course for democracy in the Middle East will remain difficult for the foreseeable future. Yet while it may be too early to describe recent regional reforms as an “Arab Spring,” one cannot help but be optimistic about the continued changes in Qatar, Bahrain and Morocco; the changes under way in Lebanon, Iraq and Algeria; and the first movements forward in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

On some tracks, we must be prepared for some reforms to move forward quickly. In the economic sphere, for example, Bahrain and Morocco each are signing bilateral free trade agreements with the United States. In the social sphere, Qatar has overhauled its education curriculum. Decision makers in the region are accepting failures of the past and demonstrating a willingness to enact change quickly. They discovered that such changes are not difficult to implement and can produce immediate material benefits.

Political reform is more difficult. Political reform advocates in the region must battle against decades of undemocratic practices and deeply entrenched personalities and interests for whom reforms are anathema. While conditions potentially could change overnight, the more likely scenario is that governing systems will change over time – if there is a commitment by the U.S. Government to continue to actively engage governments in the region on democracy and human rights.

Strategic Advantages

When talking about innovative initiatives like MEPI or the Broader Middle East Initiative and looking for “success stories” and impact, we must be wary of demanding immediate results. Everyone here needs to recall Serbia or Ukraine, countries where IRI, among others, engaged in democracy-strengthening programs for a decade before the “overnight” victories of the people against corrupt government. Democracy support is a long-term investment which, almost without exception, requires a sustained diplomatic commitment.

Thanks to initiatives like MEPI, IRI is able to provide that democratic support in the region in ways that were unavailable to us in the 1990s. MEPI has allowed us, on a daily basis and in ways diplomats cannot, to essentially implement the President’s policy of backing democrats in the Middle East. The additional funding provided through MEPI enables IRI to conduct country-specific programming in Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan and Qatar, as well as a women’s regional program. IRI appreciates that MEPI funding far exceeds that which can be provided by our traditional core source of support, the NED. At the most basic level, though, MEPI directly and positively benefits IRI’s democracy support mission by allowing us to think much more strategically about where and how we want to support democratic reform in the Middle East.

For example, systematic discrimination against women in some Middle East countries does make democratization difficult, but with MEPI funds, IRI and the National Democratic Institute have organized the Partners in Participation program to equip established and emerging women leaders with the skills they need for increased political participation.

Additionally, IRI's program in Jordan directly benefits from the MEPI initiative, where in the past, our resources and programs were largely driven by a specific event like an election. As a result, the Institute was hobbled in our efforts to plan and implement a comprehensive strategy toward democratic change. But with MEPI funds, we have opened an office in Amman, enabling us to engage political activists and elected officials at the local and national levels on a daily basis. In reaching out to reformers and supporting their endeavors in a comprehensive, meaningful way, we are helping to translate democracy policy and rhetoric into practice.

IRI's work in Morocco, Jordan, Oman, Qatar and elsewhere in the region goes to the heart of MEPI's importance because the "battle for hearts and minds" in the Middle East is also about changing public attitudes about America, and demonstrating at all levels that we do, in fact, care about people in the region, about the way their governments treat them, about whether their economies are growing at a pace fast enough to generate sufficient jobs, and about whether such opportunities are available to all members of society. This is why MEPI must continue to be a U.S. government program, and not, as some have suggested, an effort outside the government. Democrats in the Middle East who for many years felt ignored by the U.S. Government need to understand that we are willing to put our money where our mouth is by coming to their aid.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, the President's vision and commitment to democracy and human rights promotion in the region is well conceived and forcefully articulated. But the bureaucracies within the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) lag behind the Administration's direction in implementing this policy shift. All elements of our foreign policy apparatus, including our Embassies and USAID missions overseas and within the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, need to become constructively and consistently engaged to ensure that democracy promotion remains a priority and that both governments and citizens in the Middle East receive a uniform message about the need to implement reforms. In closed societies such as Saudi Arabia and Syria, involvement at a diplomatic level is critical. If democracy promotion is undertaken without the support of our embassies, the tasks before groups like IRI in an authoritarian country are rendered infinitely more difficult.

U.S. policymakers, including Members of Congress who travel to the region, must take the lead in giving praise where praise is due for those in the Middle East moving forward on democracy, to continue to condemn bad practices as warranted, and to press for the greater political space in which IRI and other nongovernmental governments can operate with indigenous reformers.

Thank you.