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of the House Committee on Government Reform**

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The National Democratic Institute (NDI) appreciates this opportunity to present its views on fostering democracy in the Middle East. NDI's work in the region has been the natural outgrowth of 21 years of experience of working around the world with the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and its other core institutes--the International Republican Institute (IRI), the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) and the Solidarity Center.

Since the 1980s, support from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has allowed for a significant increase in democracy promotion activities, as has the Department of State's application of Economic Support Funds for these purposes. Increased resources within the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) have allowed even greater opportunities for much-needed assistance.

The appropriate role of our organizations is to provide support for those forces in non-democratic societies that are seeking to promote peaceful political change, often against seemingly insurmountable odds, or at great personal risk to themselves. In new democracies, we offer assistance to governments, political parties and civil society who are finding ways to work cooperatively to construct and consolidate their nascent democratic institutions.

NDI now has 10 offices in the Middle East that are working with a large network of committed Arab democrats and reformers to promote political party development, parliamentary strengthening, and open and fair election processes.

Based on our experience in the region, NDI's democracy programs are predicated on four general beliefs and principles, all of which are germane to the topic before this subcommittee today. I will mention these principles briefly here and elaborate on them in the course of my testimony.

- 1) The desire for democracy is universal, but the features of democratic systems vary from country to country. No one size fits all.
- 2) There is no incompatibility between democracy and Islam -- quite the opposite is true. Public opinion surveys have consistently shown that citizens of the Arab and Islamic world respect the political values associated with democracy more highly in many cases than their western counterparts.
- 3) Democracy cannot and should not be imposed from the outside. NDI Chairman Madeleine Albright remarked last March at the meeting of the Congress of Democrats from the Islamic World in Istanbul: "It is not true that we intend or desire to impose anything upon anybody. Even if we did, we could not succeed. Because democracy is defined by the right of people to

express freely their own views about who should lead their own societies. The truth is that, in any place at any time, it is dictatorship that is an imposition; democracy is a choice. At the core of democracy is the premise that governments have an obligation to respect the rights and dignity of their citizens.”

- 4) The development of democracy is a long term challenge that will succeed or fail based on developing the institutions of democracy and on developing democratic behavior and thinking among citizens and voters. The field of democracy assistance, and the work of NDI, is not about regime change or about overthrowing dictators, but is about the long term support of indigenous democrats who desire to change their lives and those of their fellow citizens for the better. U.S. interests are best served when we are seen to be standing behind people, not in front of them; when we follow, not lead; and when there are self-motivated and dedicated people on the ground pursuing homegrown initiatives for democratic reform or consolidation.

Democracy Promotion in the Greater Middle East

In December 2000, NDI wrote the following paragraphs in an introduction to a Middle East democracy strategy paper,

“Close examination of the Arab world reveals a grassroots political and civic dynamism that is often obscured by the intrigues and imperatives of high politics. An explosion in international communications and cultural influences through satellite television, the Internet and an increasingly free print media, together with an increase in the activity of reasonably independent non-governmental actors are changing the way Arab populations view their leaders and their political systems. A growing force of the unemployed and underemployed educated young, displaced by reduced trade barriers and the globalization of capital and services, are demanding jobs and influence. Traditional methods—patronage, petitions, tribal and family loyalty, bloated bureaucracy and political repression—can no longer satisfy the demands of an increasingly restless populace. Parties and parliaments, long engaged in an exclusive dialogue with the elite, are trying to address their inability to listen and respond to constituents and voters.

The existence of courageous democratic activists points to the growing consciousness of a Middle Eastern “third way,” the ground between the unresponsive authoritarianism of existing regimes and the rhetoric of religious extremism. The vanguard of this new third way are cautiously chipping away at the ruling elites’ assumption that they can rule without the allegiance of the masses.”

For most of the decade of the nineties, this courageous vanguard of Arab activists struggled with few resources and little official support from the international community. Diplomatic efforts and foreign aid in the Middle East, while sometimes having a component described as “democracy and governance,” appeared to be designed largely to show tangible results from the pursuit of regional peace, and contained few programs that challenged entrenched political authorities or that encouraged a more vigorous legislative branch.

Much of the aid for political and democratic reform was channeled through official conduits, using formal and informal bilateral agreements. This reliance on official sanction for democracy aid programs virtually guaranteed that political reform efforts would fail to achieve the desired result – genuine, albeit gradual, change. International aid donors seemed to operate under an unwritten pact not to “make waves” by supporting political and democratic reform in the Arab and Muslim world. A seeming international reluctance to push political reform in countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan helped lead to a perception that international donors only demanded reform of their adversaries or of the powerless.

However, the events of September 11 and the Iraq war brought with them an entirely new set of political and policy dynamics. There is an emerging consensus that repression and lack of political freedom in much of the Middle East and larger Islamic world helped breed a group of violent malcontents willing to abuse religion to help export their version of a new political order. Radical political Islam is seen as an avenue of political participation open to the disenchanting and disaffected. Responding to these changes, there has been a discernible shift in U.S. policy, with a ramping up of initiatives designed to support citizen demand for democracy.

For those of us working in the Middle East for the last decade or more, it was not surprising or unexpected that democracy would come to be seen as a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy in the region. In fact, President Bush’s speech in 2003 at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, where he articulated a clear vision of the universality of democracy and the imperative of promoting a democratic Middle East, reverberated throughout the world, precisely because his words voiced what many had been working quietly toward for many years. President Bush said: *“Our commitment to democracy is ... tested in the Middle East, ..., and must be a focus of American policy for decades to come. In many nations of the Middle East—countries of great strategic importance—democracy has not yet taken root. And the questions arise: Are the peoples of the Middle East somehow beyond the reach of liberty? Are millions of men and women and children condemned by history or culture to live in despotism? Are they alone never to know freedom, and never even to have a choice in the matter? I, for one, do not believe it. I believe every person has the ability and the right to be free.”*

President Bush reinforced what is widely understood and so frequently demonstrated-- democracy is about universal values. I often quote an article by Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris that appeared last year in *Foreign Policy*, entitled “The True Clash of Civilization.” Basing their work on surveys and samples that encompass 80 percent of the world’s population in more than 70 countries, Inglehart and Norris conclude that at this point in history, societies throughout the world-- Muslim and Judeo-Christian alike -- see democracy as the best form of government. They argue that the real fault line between the West and Islam concerns certain cultural issues such as gender equality and social liberalization, but not attitudes towards democracy.

Survey after survey shows that people in the Islamic world want to choose the people who make the decisions that affect their lives and they have accepted the types of institutions that one might have to have in a democracy. Arabs and Muslims accept the idea that there has to be some type of body that is elected and that provides accountability and oversight over the people who are chosen to lead. People in the West and Islamic countries agree in terms of having open choice, in having political competition, in having parties that provide a choice when people go to the ballot box.

I would argue that this last point is the jumping-off point for democratic development programs. Democracy as a system of government is endorsed by 80 percent of the people around the world, with almost no difference among cultures or civilizations. But what are the institutions? How are they built? Will the entrenched authoritarian leaders allow people the freedom to build them? Can there be true freedom of expression in the Middle East? This is exactly where the field known as democratic development or democracy promotion comes in, to support those political processes that embody the aspirations of the people, are guaranteed by their country's constitutions, are consistent with the charters and by-laws of a number of international organizations, as well as international declarations and standards.

Recent Democratic Developments in the Region

Two watershed electoral exercises earlier this year in Iraq and the Palestinian territories have inspired democrats across the region and beyond. The upcoming Palestinian legislative elections, Lebanese polls scheduled for late May and the Egyptian presidential contest in October, could prove to be a testing ground for the future of political contestation in the region, and will have an impact on democratic reform and elections throughout the region.

The frequent justifications for the slow pace of reform in the Arab world -- the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, poverty and/or the existence of internal Islamic terrorist groups -- won't stand up to the demonstration effect of millions of Iraq's embattled citizens going to the polls to cast a free vote. In dictatorships like Syria, and in unreformed hereditary monarchies like Saudi Arabia, citizens are likely to ask "if them, why not us?", even though further movement towards democracy may well be blocked. The effect will also be felt by political and economic liberalizers like Jordan, Qatar and Bahrain, by semi-authoritarian Egypt, and by countries like Morocco and Yemen that have already embarked on a political reform path.

Arab activists are in a demanding mood, taking advantage of every opportunity to push for more freedom and more accountability from their leaders. Democrats are active in newly elected legislatures, within reform-oriented political parties, in women's organizations and among a plethora of non-governmental organizations.

These indigenous democratizers have long ago declared dead declared the debate about the compatibility of democracy and Islam, and welcome practical assistance from the United States and other countries. While the men and women who form this nascent indigenous democracy network may have serious misgivings about certain U.S. policies in the region, they are committed to the struggle for democracy in the Middle East and they welcome and deserve outside validation of their quest.

The current state of political affairs in the Arab world is a result of the mutually reinforcing nature of authoritarian rulers on the one hand and religious extremists on the other, rather than any religious or cultural bias against democracy. Drawing strength and legitimacy from each other, these two extremes are in a destabilizing slow dance that has been destroying the fabric of many Arab and Muslim nations. Moderate elements, whose liberalizing messages are often feared by repressive regimes, find themselves squeezed between the State and the religious extremists; both sides fearing that their power base is threatened by a more open political system.

This destructive circle can only be broken by the emergence of a democratic or middle alternative, which will disrupt the political monopoly of the extremes, in much the same way as the emergence of a democratic middle led to a renewal of democratic politics in the Philippines, Chile and much of Latin America in the late 1980s. The democratic middle exists within the non-governmental organizations that agitate for better policy, better governance and more respect for human rights. Democrats are found within the ranks of political parties, even in certain Islamist groupings, where many share fundamental democratic values and desire that elections be held under transparent and consistent rules. The democratic middle is also present within officialdom, where many toil anonymously to improve the state of public affairs.

U.S.-sponsored programs to assist democracy in the Middle East, including MEPI, have been working to straddle the various impractical, and ultimately destructive, policy debates by putting forward a support mechanism for indigenous, as opposed to the perception of imposed, democracy in the Arab and Islamic world.

A Strategy for Democracy in the Greater Middle East

To the extent that indigenous and independent democratic forces do exist throughout the Middle East, and that, over time, extremism cannot prosper in an environment of greater freedom where political speech is encouraged and rulers are held accountable, a democratization strategy for the region emerges.

Such a strategy is based on identifying and strengthening the moderate middle—professionals, academics, women, students, shopkeepers, who, if given a chance, could play a central role in a democratic system. Working with these and other indigenous democrats, including civil society leaders, human rights activists, reform-minded politicians and modernists within the Islamic movement, the international community can help provide the skills and linkages they need to counter the entrenched extremes.

It should be recognized that democratic institutions in the Middle East may not fully resemble their western counterparts. Traditional tribal and consultative mechanisms, for example, may exist alongside formal parliaments in certain countries, and political parties may cultivate a more narrow geographical or ethnic base. A comprehensive strategy should also incorporate a realistic time frame for the development of true democracy -- years in many cases, although progress will vary.

Following are some key principles and programs that could form part of a strategy to promote indigenous democracy in the Arab and Islamic worlds:

Assess the countries where the openings are the greatest and where democracy is most likely to take hold.

When considering democratic development, there are three broad groupings of countries in the Middle East. The first group could be considered “breakthrough countries” where circumstances, including a weak state and/or military occupation, have created a climate where elections and democracy are seen as an attractive option for creating new institutions

and joining the mainstream international community. Countries/territories in this category include Iraq, Lebanon, and the West Bank and Gaza (Palestine).

The second group, sometimes called “liberalizers” and “reformers”, can also be considered “emerging democracies” by virtue of having both a governmental commitment to reform and significant citizen demand for change. Following a “managed” process of change, these countries seek to allow political openings, and are generally hospitable to outside support and engagement. Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Kuwait, Qatar and Yemen all fall into this category.

The third group of countries, some authoritarian, some “semi” authoritarian, actively resist change or seek to manage any process of change to the advantage of the existing leadership. These countries, which tend to be the most critical of outside democracy efforts, insist that change must be completely locally driven but then actively close political space, and hinder political debate and participation. Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia are in this category.

Design democracy assistance programs to capitalize on the openings available.

Within the group of liberalizers where assistance is more welcomed, training and support can be provided in a cooperative manner to government, opposition and civil society. Political parties and parliamentarians can be exposed to successful models, and non-governmental organizations, often the vanguard of the democratic middle, seek support on advocacy techniques. Focus groups and scientific opinion research can be used to help politicians understand the demands of voters.

In countries like Egypt, programs should be designed to reinforce constructive and existing citizen demand for change. Programs could include training for women and young people trying to break the monopoly on political power, training on professional standards for journalists, development of democracy web sites, the inclusion of country activists in regional networking, and training of domestic election monitors.

Use the opportunities created by elections, political leadership changes and other discontinuities to promote contestation of political power.

Ultimately democracy will only take hold in semi-authoritarian states when a political event occurs that creates an opportunity for an alternation of power. In the meantime, democracy promotion efforts should be aimed at increasing the competitiveness of elections through political party training programs, international and domestic election monitoring efforts and through conflict resolution and coalition building advice to parties and political leaders.

Support women’s political empowerment.

Women, by virtue of being largely excluded from power, have a vested interest in the dispersion of power, one of the fundamental principles of democracy. Women’s leadership training, political party internal democracy, and material support and training for female political candidacies can help women break political barriers.

Build democratic networks.

There are surprisingly few links among democrats in the Arab and Islamic world. For example, there are few regional Arab voices to speak out against human rights violations or other abuses of freedom and there is no equivalent of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) or Organization of American States (OAS) to develop region-wide elections and political standards. Support for networks of democrats of the Islamic world should be actively encouraged; this would help counter, or balance, the devastating use that extremists make of international networks.

Challenges Ahead

President Bush's policy statements on democracy have helped stimulate debate in the Middle East, and provided a measure of political space for reformers, who have used his pronouncements to push more actively for change. And some regimes have appeared more reluctant to crack down on such reformers. At the same time, a number of challenges remain and certain questions arise:

- The first is whether, on a sustained basis, U.S. policy will place democracy higher on the bi-lateral agenda, particularly in places where other shorter term political and security issues may take precedence.

- Second, will sufficient resources over the long term be made available to sustain U.S. commitments on democracy assistance?

- Third, will the U.S. continue to dedicate those resources to the type of programs that support genuine political reform?

In the end, while the U.S. government can set the tone, and foreign aid can provide needed resources for democratic development, much of the work on the ground must be done by non-governmental organizations. This is particularly true in the Middle East. Groups such as NDI are capable of assuming responsibility, yet are not constrained by the stringent rules of formal diplomacy. NGOs can readily share information, knowledge and experiences with groups and individuals who are pursuing or consolidating democracy, sometimes without the cooperation or sanction of their government.

Perhaps most important, in countries where one of the primary issues being addressed is the paucity of autonomous civic and political institutions, the fundamental idea that government ought not to control all aspects of society can be undermined by a too-visible donor government hand in the development and implementation of democracy programs.

NGO initiatives must grow out of the needs of democrats in the host country. The work should always be in the open and should be conducted with partners committed to pluralism and nonviolence. At the same time, consultation is necessary with the Congress, USAID missions and embassies. When public funds are used, transparency and accountability should always prevail.