

Remarks of Walter Isaacson

National Democratic Institute 2011 Democracy Dinner

Washington, DC, November 7, 2011

We started this evening with a panel on Arab democracy and where the reform movement is headed. I would love it if I could to introduce the people who were on that panel. And you can give them a round of applause: Atia Lawgali from Libya; Sheikh Mohammed Abu Luhoum from Yemen; Dr. Amal Habib al Yusuf from Bahrain. Mohammad Al Abdallah of Syria; Rafat Al Akhali of Yemen; Dr. Munira Fakhro of Bahrain; and somebody you will see in a moment, without spoiling the surprise for you, Dr. Azza Kamel of Egypt.

I was asked by Ken to moderate this panel, which was an incredibly easy job because everybody was talking, they were filled with ideas and it moved very quickly. I was also asked by Ken to summarize the panel, and that's a very difficult job because so much was said, and it was so interesting.

But let me just point out a couple of things that they said. A lot of us who have watched the Arab Spring, we live by this sort of new maxim that each of these are separate, each of these revolutions are separate, that we shouldn't look upon them as one big movement. I think in a lot of ways the panelists disabused us of this idea.

Whether it was Rafat talking about the youth movement and how on the Facebook pages of people in Yemen, and Libya, and Syria, and Egypt all worked together, or Dr. Kamel talking about women's movements – how they all work together – and all the panelists talking about how the reform movement in the Arab Spring has helped transcend the sectarian strife between Sunnis and Shia's and other groups in that region. It became very clear that, like in 1848 or 1968, a lot of these reform movements and democracy movements are connected by a common set of values.

Secretary Albright talked about those values, which are basic human values – human values that we all yearn for wherever we live or whatever sect we're from. The value of being respected and having in role in the governance of your society. I did particularly appreciate Mr. Lawgali of Libya saying that in Libya and in Texas, these are the two places you can wave an American flag now and be cheered. I do think, Ken, NDI does not have chapter in Texas, but you're doing a great job in Libya.

So it's my pleasure now to present the Madeleine K. Albright Grant, which is bestowed by NDI each year to honor an international organization that creates greater roles for women in political and civic life. Secretary Albright was NDI's founding vice-chair, and since 2001, its chairman. Her own life story speaks directly to the potential that women throughout the world have. But I'd also like to say that her own life story speaks to the potential that every human being has in

furthering the cause of democracy because she was in exile from the twin evils, the twin opponents to the causes of democracy of the twentieth century, Nazism and communism. She found her home in the U.S. and contributed immeasurably to the development of our own democracy, while never forgetting the struggles for people who fight for freedom everywhere.

This year's Madeleine K. Albright Grant is awarded to Egypt's Appropriate Communication Techniques for Development Center, known as ACT. In this year of the Arab Spring, NDI is proud that the recipients helped strengthen the political and social engagement of Arab women.

Though not always credited, except for in our panel earlier this evening, women have played a critical role in inspiring the events in Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt, Bahrain and elsewhere. We know that the advancement of women is central to development, central here in our country. My wife is involved with the Washington Area Women's Foundation. But it's helped me learn that women are essential to development in every part of the world and in every community. The status of women is particularly of concern in the Arab world, where in some nations, more than half the women are illiterate, and they don't have the political power they go elsewhere. They're impeded by laws and by cultural attitudes. There is a real concern that women will be sidelined in the aftermath of the revolutions, when the protests give way to governing. On the other hand, there's a real opportunity that the Arab reform spring will mean the great liberation of women coming to their proper seats of power and helping to lead the Arab world and the rest of the world to a better place.

ACT is a counterbalance to the concerns of what could happen. It was founded in 1992 as an Egyptian NGO working in development and women's rights. It provides training and consultation for civic institutions that advance not just women's rights but all human rights. The center brings together a distinguished team of experts, administrators and development specialists. Its operational units include elements devoted to training, human resources, gender issues, civic education and media watch.

In the aftermath of 2011, ACT is on the cutting edge of political change in Egypt. Its vision statement asserts, "We're a group of women and men activists in the field of advocating women's rights, eager to build a just and democratic community where all forms of discrimination are eliminated, whether based on sex, race, color, creed, ideology, political views or social class." That's a manifesto and a vision statement we all could learn from wherever we are. ACT leads political coalitions that are working to change the status of women in Egypt's legal system and society. It's involved in efforts to pass laws against domestic violence and to punish sexual harassment. Ultimately, ACT is helping to construct the next Egypt, a new Egypt, with more than 5,000 years of history; this ancient land is both a traditional yet also a very modern society.

So NDI is privileged to bestow the 2011 Madeleine K. Albright Grant on ACT. We hope this award will help ACT assume a greater role in determining the future of Egypt. And to accept the

grant tonight, as the saltwater of the stars of our panel earlier this evening, Dr. Azza Kamel, the director of ACT, and the founder of the Women's Research Center. Dr. Kamel holds a PhD in civic education, published many studies in the areas of sexual harassment, the impact of violence on women, the image of men and women in the media and many other fields. She has worked with NGOs and private organization to build up the participation of women. Dr. Kamel is the coordinator of Egypt's women's mock parliament. She was a founding member of the feminist coalition, which was established after the revolution earlier this year. If I could invite you up Dr. Kamel, so that we, I hope Secretary Albright and the rest of us, can present you with the 5th annual Madeleine K. Albright award.