

Muslim Democrat

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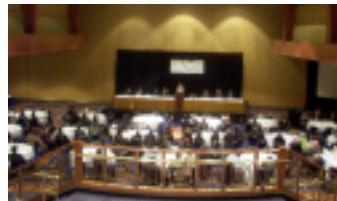
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Special Event:

Pushing the Envelope of Democracy in Saudi Arabia

By Asma Afsaruddin
Chair, CSID Board of Directors

I had the good fortune to participate in a remarkable two-day symposium recently (December 19-20) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, entitled **Shura, Democracy, and Good Governance**, in cooperation between CSID and the *King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies*.



Shura is the Arabic word for consultation and has historically referred to consultative decision-making in many spheres of life, particularly the political. The symposium was co-sponsored by the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy, an inter-faith think tank based in Washington, D.C. A select group of speakers were invited from various parts of the Middle East and the United States. What transpired during the formal presentations and subsequent discussions was quite an eye-opener and hopefully a harbinger of future political trends in Saudi Arabia.

Among the speakers during the opening session were members of the powerful Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Council) who warmly welcomed the

foreign participants but also politely expressed their reservations about the congruence between *shura* and democracy. It was generally assumed that democracy referred to liberal democracy. Thus



The CSID conference in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia attracted over 200 religious and political leaders

relentless secularization and a strict separation of religion and politics were understood to be integral aspects of the democratic experiment.

However, as became apparent during sessions the following day, democracy as a concept is amenable to multiple, compet-

ing definitions. One could talk about procedural, constitutional and republican democracies, in addition to the liberal. As one speaker would affirm, several historical features of Muslim political culture consultation, creation of consensus, public ratification and accountability of leaders render the Islamic milieu quite hospitable to the adoption of modern democratic processes. Over and over again, participants pointed to the flexibility and diversity within Islamic thought that had in the past been and would continue in the present to be accommodating of socio-political changes. A number of panelists discussed how even some Islamists in a number of countries were pushing for the adoption of democratic procedures. One (male) panelist passionately made a plea for reforms concerning womens position in much of the Middle East, pointing to Islams early gender egalitarianism.

I was the only female speaker invited to address the gathering. When one keeps in mind that women rarely address sexually mixed public assemblies in Saudi Arabia and that they are not allowed to drive or vote, this was not an inconsequential event. On our first night in Riyadh, we caused consternation among some when the female contingent of our group

“our conference represented a milestone.”

sat down in the main hall of the auditorium (but discreetly in the back) where the opening ceremony was held. We were later informed that women were expected to sit upstairs cloistered in a special section. The minor rumblings caused by our intrusion into the masculine realm hardened the resolve of the (male) conveners from the King Faisal Center to continue to seat us in the main hall for the rest of the symposium. Let the chips fall where they may! In this highly patriarchal kingdom, our conversations on the prospects for democracy, womens conspicuous presence, and

my role as a formal participant spoke volumes about the possibility of change in slow but tangible increments, even on such highly sensitive issues of political enfranchisement and gendered space.

But possibly the most illuminating and heartening aspect of the symposium was the candid nature of the opinions expressed during the question and answer session. The bulk of the comments from the audience expressed support for the adoption of democratic procedures and a desire to see more social and political changes brought about in the kingdom. Very few remarks expressed visceral hostility to the conferences premise or to the contents of the papers presented. One Saudi young man was exceptional in insisting (contrary to historical examples) that shura was not practiced in the early period of Islam and added (mystifyingly) that some of the speakers were contributing to the zionisation of Islam.

Others discussed the imprecision of the terms Islamist and modernist. One commentator expressed impatience with getting bogged down in drawing parallels between shura and democracy and complained that most of the participants had forgotten the third element in the title good governance. Assign elections and ballots, representative government and accountable leadership to whatever rubric you will, he said, if it results in good governance, then that is what we want. Comments like these were the surest indication that issues of good governance are paramount in the minds of Saudi citizens and that they are eager for outlets to express themselves.

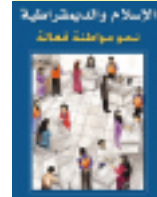
By providing a respectful and disciplined environment for the airing of such critical and contested issues in a country that is the birthplace of Islam and an important ally of the US, our conference represented a milestone.

Asma Afsaruddin is chair of the Board of Directors of CSID, and associate professor of Arabic & Islamic Studies at the University of Notre Dame.

NEW CSID PUBLICATIONS

Special Offer: Get one publication FREE, when you join or renew your membership.

Islam and Democracy: “Toward Effective Citizenship”



This training manual/textbook is an Arabic-language guide to teaching about democracy in Muslim societies for leaders involved in grassroots education in their

communities. The guide was written by EIGHT authors from Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, and Jordan in collaboration with CSID and Street Law, Inc.

Date of Publication: Dec. 2005 Price: \$ 10

Workshops on Islam and Democracy



Reports (in English and Arabic) on 8 recent workshops and seminars organized, since 2004, in Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, Bahrain, Tunisia, Algeria, Iran, and Saudi

Arabia. These workshops highlight the effort that has been undertaken to promote debate and discussions between leading political and religious scholars and activists in those countries with the objective of building common goals and strategies for democracy, good governance, rule of law, transparency, and accountability.

Date of Publication: May, 2006 Price: \$ 10

The Implementation of Shari'ah in a Democracy: The Nigerian Experience



This book contains the proceedings of CSID's conference on “Shari'ah and Democracy” in Nigeria on July 2004 where over 300

Imams, academicians and civil servants attended and discussed the Nigerian experience. The proceedings published in this volume capture the important debate that revolves around Islamic law and its application.

Date of Publication: Jan. 2006 Price: \$ 10

U.S. Efforts to Promote Democracy

By Farid Senzai

In the past three years we have seen tremendous enthusiasm on the part of the Bush administration in promoting democracy and political reform in the Middle East. The pro-democracy declarations by high level officials started in November 2003 when President Bush, speaking at the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), announced the need to adopt what he called a "forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East." While the administration continues to speak of its sincere desire to bring democracy to the region, they are being greeted with skepticism and at times outright resentment from the Arab world.

Problems with the Strategy

First, the timing of the effort has raised many questions. The new push for democracy is seen by some as nothing more than a way to deflect criticism away from the administration's failed Iraq policy. With the ongoing occupation of Iraq and the continued struggle with a growing insurgency, some critics have questioned the administration's motives.

Second, the content of the new strategy is recycled from programs already in place at the State Department, under the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). The MEPI program was formulated in Washington with little or no consultation from the region. It is big on themes but short on substance. Furthermore, in a place where appearance is important, the MEPI program is running into credibility issues because it is hesitant to engage with moderate Islamists in the region.

While it is still early to draw definitive conclusions, some of the preliminary findings show MEPI's projects are having the opposite effect from what was intended.

a. Much of the funding goes to non-governmental organizations (NGO) that are very western in their orientation yet they lack roots in the community and have no domestic constituency. In addition, many of the funded groups spend most of their time pleasing their donor in hopes of obtaining future funding rather than meeting the needs of the people they claim to represent. (i.e. not representative)

b. The enormous level of outside funding has resulted in elitist groups within the NGO community. Rather than facilitating horizontal networks among groups as is the case with domestically funded groups, the external funding has intensified the division between the "haves" and the "have nots", and centralizes resources in the hands of the few that have connections with the West.

c. Most of the funded groups tend to be competitive and protective of their "turf", often refusing to work with other groups and often involved in "uncivil" activities. (i.e. weaker civil society).

The administration needs to stop indulging in the fantasy of democratizing the Middle East through grand funding schemes that only go towards western style NGOs. Any future plan must identify organizations that are truly representative and have legitimacy within each country. If Bush's new strategy continues along the lines of MEPI, we are at best going to see very little change in the region, and at worst a drastic setback for future reform.

Recommendations

For the Bush administration's democracy efforts to succeed it must do the following:

1. The administration must stop insisting

that its "war on terror" will inevitably make the world a safer place, and that the Middle East will subsequently witness, for the first time in its turbulent history, the benefits of "freedom and democracy". The reality is that the US "war on terror" has intensified the problems in the region, resulting in a more unstable and less safe Middle East. Much of the problems have to do with a conflicting and irreconcilable foreign policy pursued by the administration since September 11 and one that continues to support "friendly tyrants" in the region.

2. The administration must engage Arabs at all levels and be in sync with regional realities. The plan must gain acceptance from both Arabs in government as well as Arabs in the street. This requires an initiative that seeks input from the Arab world at its conception, rather than simply presenting a cooked plan at the end. Egyptians and Saudis will not embrace a democracy that does not take their views into account, especially if they feel that their cultural and religious traditions are being slighted.

3. The administration must avoid making the mistakes that currently plague programs like MEPI. The President's strategy is more likely to work if its funding effort goes toward legitimate grassroots organizations that have significant constituency within each country. This will require that the administration break free from its long held belief that all funding must go towards western style, secular organizations. Our purpose should not be to push a democracy that is in our image yet foreign to the people in the region.

The President's strategy to promote democracy in the Middle East is off to a shaky start and will probably fail in its current form. It is clear that the administration's strategy needs a major overhaul. If not, Bush's visionary talk of a "freedom and democracy" for all people in the region may convince some Americans that their intentions are genuine, but is unlikely to have much effect on the region it is purporting to change.

THE CHALLENGE OF DEMOCRACY IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

By: Sherif Mansour
CSID Conference Coordinator

The Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID) held its seventh annual Conference in Washington, DC on May 5-6, 2006 at the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel. Under the main theme "The Challenge of Democracy in the Muslim World", 250 participants included scholars, activists, leaders of private and public sectors, policy makers and officials from the United States and the Muslim world. Keynote speakers included Saad Eddine El-Othmani, S.G. of the Justice and Development Party in

Democrats in the Arab World (NDAW), who presented their plans for the network and their ideas about the democratic transition in their home countries.

Radwan Masmoudi, President of CSID, opened the conference by welcoming the guests and highlighting the importance of such an event at this critical time in history. He noted that the annual conference has become a tradition where scholars and activists share their commitment to the study and promotion of democracy in the Muslim world. Specifically, he called for supporting popular movements rather than oppressive tyrannies and corrupt regimes, building a global network of Muslim democrats who can exchange their skills and experiences, and helping those struggling to establish open and democratic systems in their communities.

Tony Sullivan, Vice-Chair of CSID, welcomed the participants and chaired the first session. **Marina Ottaway** talked about the necessity for democracy promotion in Arab countries. Ottaway argued that the reason for the success of Islamists is that other political parties have virtually disappeared in many countries. Therefore, she asserted, while discussing the success of Islamist parties, it is crucial to explore the reasons for the collapse of non-Islamist parties.

Anas Malik raised the question of whether political Islam is inherently fascist or free. He argued that a vibrant

and alternative understanding of political Islam, that can be seen as potentially and inherently libertarian, in fact exists, but unfortunately has not received significant attention or elaboration in academia.

Mohamed Between asserted that there are seven substantial challenges facing the process of Islamizing democracy in Muslim countries over the coming years. He conditioned the successful democratization in Muslim countries by the success of active and peaceful participation of Islamist groups in the political process. He concluded by emphasizing the necessity of Islamizing democracy in the Muslim world; it is the only process by which peace and stability can be brought to these nations.

Husain Haqqani pointed out that the absence of democracy in Muslim countries such as Pakistan are the result of a complex interplay between external factors and the desire of elites, such as the military, to benefit from them. He concluded that For Pakistan to move towards democracy, international support for the military would have to diminish and genuine contestation between various political parties would have to replace a political system manipulated by the military in the name of Islam.

John Entelis evaluated the policies of president Bouteflika since he came to power in Algeria and during his second term by admitting the fact that there was some positive progress in many levels, however a stable and a nationally



The CSID 7th Annual conference was rich with excellent papers and thoughtful discussions

Morocco, Ambassador Randall L. Tobias, Administrator, United States Agency For International Development (USAID), Carl Gershman, President, National Endowment for Democracy (NED), Peter F. Mulrean, Middle East Partnership Initiative, Department of State, and Laith Kubba, director of Middle East & North Africa, NED and former spokesman for the Iraqi government. Also among the participants were 14 members of the Steering Committee of the Network of

reconstituted political order has yet to translate into freedom, liberty, or democracy. He concluded that the Algerian government needs to resolve fundamental constitutional questions and Washington must stop being silent on Algeria's political status.

Louay Safi defended his thesis that there is no innate capacity for democracy in Syrian civil society, such as willingness for compromise or power sharing. He suggested that shortest way to democracy is to empower civil society, in a gradual and slow process.

Amb. Randall Tobias, Deputy Secretary of State, Director of United States



Amb. Randall Tobias

Foreign Assistance, and Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) asserted that Democracy, as Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has noted, is not "West-

ern." Traditions of public reasoning can be found in nearly all countries and is part of the common human inheritance. As President Bush has pointed out, more than half of all Muslims in the world live in freedom under democratically constituted governments. The compatibility of Islam and democracy is reflected in a recent Gallup poll that examined views of the West in the Muslim world. Ambassador Tobias also highlighted that President Bush has a vision "to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.". The United States spent about \$27.5 billion in 2005 on promoting economic growth, social welfare (including health and education), and good governance in underdeveloped nations. The reason the government spends this money, he continued, is first and foremost due to our sense of moral obligation. He explains that we cannot turn our backs on the

millions of children who succumb to starvation and disease each day, when the ability to address it is in our hands, nor can we turn our backs on citizens who toil under oppressive poverty. The second reason, however, is that our futures are inextricably linked to those we seek to assist. Governments that rule justly, encourage economic freedom and opportunity, and invest in their people—the hallmarks of democracies—do not produce, let alone tolerate, terrorists. People who see a hopeful future for themselves and their families are not willing to bind bombs to their bodies.

“By providing a forum for authentic Muslim voices to debate the critical issues facing their societies, CSID is making a vital contribution to that understanding.”

Amb. Randall Tobias

Carl Gershman, President of the National Endowment for Democracy began by praising CSID' efforts and activities. “we can see clearly how fast and steady the organization has been developing and how popular and successful it has become,” he said. He asserted that such organizations work as “ambassadors who represent and build bridges that can transmit, support, and promote the values of democracy, human rights, and peace across the Muslim World.”

Abdallah Schleifer began the session by highlighting the fact that even American TV/ journalism suffers tremendously, but media in the Arab world is largely over-politicized. Everything gets played out in the media and not in everyday life as it usually does. The BBC

and Al-Jazeera etc. are not charities and there is an influential political economic force behind them.

Phillip Seib noted that communications and information technologies could be potent tools in fostering political transformation, although they remain to varying degrees dependent on political institutions and other non-media factors. The effect of new media on democratization is very much a work in progress.

Abdurrahim Foukara highlighted the many types of democracy and the many different Muslim 'worlds'. He also reviewed the relation between governments and media in western countries. He said that the British government subjected the BBC to its editorial command, and the US media responded to the Iraq invasion/war the same way, and no one questioned the motives of the war. On the other hand, Al-Jazeera took a critical stance towards the U.S. role in Iraq and Arab governments.

The session on "NDAW: Voices of Democrats from the Arab World" was chaired by **Abderrahim Sabir**, CSID Program Officer & Coordinator of the Network of Democrats in the Arab World. He noted that the network is unique since it is the first regional network that includes voices of both moderate Islamist and secular democrats in the Arab World. He then invited members of the steering committee of the network to speak.

Hani Hourani (Jordan) talked about the capacity of this network to empower civil society to create a network and provide protection and support for democratic voices. **Jamal Bendahmane** (Morocco), highlighted the ability for networking to encounter and face the challenges of oppression and despotism in the region. He asserted that the network effort is a long-term process that needs work and perseverance. **Dina Dahkqan** (Jordan), highlighted the importance of the network in serving the cause of women's participation in the Arab world. **Mokhtar**

Benabdallaoui (Morocco) pointed out that the network is responsible for facilitating debates between secularists and Islamists. **Kamal Ben Younes** (Tunisia) examined the deteriorating political climate in his country where parties are divided and denied a role in government. He added that this network gives them a unifying platform and a way to communicate and possibly work together. He expressed his surprise that Islamists and secularists could actually get along and see eye to eye on some issues. **Marwan Faouri** (Jordan) pointed out that in every country there is room for democracy and change toward a more civil society. **Boudjema Ghechir** (Algeria) reviewed the struggle for democracy in his country through the past decades and how single party rule needs to be eliminated for a real democratic process to emerge.

The Annual Banquet featured **Saadeddine el-Othmani**, who received



Dr. Saadeddine el-Othmani (from Morocco) gave the Banquet Dinner Keynote Speech and received the CSID Annual *Muslim Democrat of the Year* Award.

the CSID 2006 "Muslim Democrat of the Year" Award. He presented his party and his own thoughts concerning democracy and human rights issues. Othmani asserted that the Islamist movement adopts the Islamic reference, and argued that "Identity and cultural precondition is a fundamental and necessary introduction for any reform." However, he continued, that references, by nature, "must be subjected to criticism, revision, and renovation". He pointed out that in Islam the state is civil, not religious in the sense commonly known in Western political thought. Even though Islam has no fixed form of governance or of citizen participa-

tion, it left the matter for human creativity to be decided according to ever-changing circumstances. In any case, "the people's will is the decisive criterion in all this". He concluded that the major function of the state is not to interfere in citizens' beliefs, or to impose specific religious conceptions or judgments on them. Instead, it should be more concerned with managing public affairs within the framework of the local value system. The state is also to ensure the freedom of opinion and expression, the right to worship and build religious institutions for all citizens in an open and tolerant atmosphere.

The second day included eight panel sessions and two luncheon keynote addresses. **Mustafa Khalfi** examined U.S. involvement in the democratic development in Morocco from the early 1990s until 2004. He gave a thorough analysis of the internal and external factors that had

impact on reform in Morocco while evaluating the real challenges for reform and the possible ways to resolve them.

Maryam Knight tracked the word *'fasad'* in Islamic

tradition, highlighting the fact that "whereas democracies tend to categorize corruption as a form of white-collar crime, the Qur'an looks upon it as a capital offense, requiring execution or exile." She proposed using the concepts of accountability as key solutions to fight corruption, but at the same time, convincing the *'mofsedeen'* (corrupt people) to stop, and give charity and zakat to poor people.

Reza Eslami pointed out that the reform movement in Iran is continuing despite the result of the recent presidential elections. He argued that the movement is deeply rooted in the Iranian society among

youth, women and activists who are willing to continue struggling for their rights. To support this view, he cited some of the reform issues that are highly debated in modern Iranian society.

Neil Hicks examined the Bush administration's perceptions of the Middle East. He argued that it is inconsistent, shaky and composed of policy that is conjectural at best. For all the idealistic rhetoric, the promotion of democracy by the U.S. government is still met with broad skepticism by many people in the region and results to date have been mixed.

Joshua Muravchik tried to measure the impact of the strong showing of Islamists in recent elections, and denied that it should trigger a 'second-guessing' of the American policy of promoting democracy in the region. U. S. policy makers realize that democracy won't happen overnight, but they fail to understand the ideology of authoritative regimes. He pointed out the theory of a democratic peace: democracies never go to war with one another, it has to do with the attitudes that people have in a democracy.

Alon Ben Meir discussed the fact that democracy and freedom don't automatically translate into one another. Democratic organizations need to organize and touch the heart and mind and soul of the people like the Islamist parties do with health care, social services and religion. He concluded that it is impossible to successfully introduce democracy without an initial transitional period, during which homegrown forces will work to shape an emerging democratic system consistent with each society's unique needs and environment.

Carrie Wickham examined Islamists' internal processes of self-conscious redefinition of their goals and strategies. She argued that Islamists advocate elections because it would benefit them and their interests, but they have also softened their positions on issues such as

women and minorities to bolster their democratic credentials. The experience of running for and winning elections subjects them to pressures for transparency and accountability. Informed by a new Islamist discourse, they take a centrist approach, moving away from insisting on application of sharia to more general ideas like an Islamic 'frame of reference'.

Sean Brooks assessed the democratic commitments of Islamist Parties in Turkey, Morocco, and Jordan. He recognized three main moderate Islamist groups, AKP in Turkey, the Justice and Development in Morocco, and IAF in Jordan. Each of them has its own model for democratization that can easily be illustrated from measuring behavioral, attitudinal, and constitutional change. He concluded that Turkish Islamists, in fact, appear to have adopted normative commitments to liberal democracy, while Jordanian Islamists resemble democrats who - despite maintaining certain illiberal values - are genuinely committed to constitutional democracy.

Carola Richter examined the theoretical frame for analyzing the relationship between Islamists, the media, and democratization in pre-transitional



Nearly 300 people participated in the conference and listened attentively to over 40 papers and presentations.

and transitional stages. She pointed out that Islamists should be understood during these stages as functional actors for democratization; they can mobilize people and confront the regime, but there is a fear that they will re-implement authoritarian

structures. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood and Labor Party managed to overcome the government by using Internet technology to escape the confiscation of their publications.

Shadi Hamid discussed the democracy promotion policy of the current US administration. He argued that since it is usually framed in national security concerns, the policy is still about interests, not ideals. Therefore, it is hard to justify democracy when it stops being in U.S. interests. This is why the US has the contradictory objectives of promoting democracy, but containing the power of Islamists. According to Hamid, democracy is not in U.S. short-term interests, but that should not dissuade us from supporting it - we should support it because we believe in it.

Rachael Scott examined the concept of citizenship in Egyptian Islamist thought in relation to the rights of non-Muslims, specifically Egyptian Copts. She compared the kind of citizenship that is articulated in Islamic thought with Western notions of citizenship, highlighting the points of congruence and the points of difference.

Alan Cordova gave a historical background of Islam in Spain and highlighted that there is 800,000 Muslims in southern Spain alone. He pointed out that there is no multi-cultural policy in Spain. Islam is taught in schools to Muslims only, and Catholicism is taught among all children in schools as a basic ethic and moral basis for Spanish society.

Vanessa Ruget highlighted the uniqueness of the Kyrgyzstan model as the country has more than eighty ethnicities, and a strong sense of citizenship over ethnic identity. Around 75% of the

population is Muslim however Islam in central Asia is not very dogmatic due to the Russian communist influence. It is more of a culture and identity than a legislative, dogmatic religion. Radical Islam is active among groups who feel excluded.

The luncheon keynote address by **Peter F. Mulrean**, Middle East Partnership Initiative, evaluated the three years of existence of MEPI and reviewed the challenges of promoting democracy in the Middle East. He argued that even though strong disagreements with US policy are apparent, there is also increasing numbers of individuals who are raising their voices on issues concerning political and social reforms. There is tangible support for democratic reforms in the region. Governments in the region are not committed to reform, despite all the rhetoric. Yet, MEPI has supported 350 projects -most of them from non-governmental actors, independent media, women in democracy, in law and politics, and youth.

Laith Kubba, Director of Middle East & North Africa at NED, and former spokesman for the Iraqi government, presented various explanations for the failure in Iraq. The American point of view is "there have been too many assumptions and tactical errors, and not enough planning". Islamists on the other hand blame the US because the rules have been laid out by the US. He concluded that Iraqi leaders have shown little maturity in power-sharing or developing a political agenda for the country. Islam has strong appeal in the country, and any future plans should accept and deal with this reality.

Wael Nawara presented his approach to interpreting Islamic teachings: "it's our culture that needs to change, not the Qur'an." "We need a reform movement to understand our religion", he continued. He argued that there has always been a gap between divine will and human understanding, which is always temporal,

relative, and personal. Islam was a liberating movement by freeing slaves, banning prejudice and discrimination, pushing for justice and equality, increasing rights for women and minorities, in addition to freeing Muslims from fear, poverty, bias, and inherited traditions.



Wael Nawara, from Egypt, spoke about how to re-interpret Islam for the 21st century

Asma Afsaruddin examined the notion of 'Islamic State', specifically the claim by modern Islamist ideologues that their idea of 'Islamic state' extends back to early Islam. She argued that after the Prophet's death, people debated who should succeed him. There was no blueprint for an Islamic government set out in this process. They devised a solution based on human reasoning.

Abdulaziz Sachedina began by pointing out that religion and politics are intertwined in Islam; "Islam is a world-accepting religion, not a world-denying religion, so engagement in politics is important." He argued that democratic governance based on the project of modernity will not be authentic if it requires separation of religion and politics in Islam. He concluded by asserting that Islamic government can't be a theocracy because the leader must still be accountable to the public. Therefore, democracy in the Muslim world must allow freedom of religion and freedom of conscience

Mariam Memarsadeghi presented Freedom House's comparative study on "The Status and Role of Women in the Middle East". This publication looked at law of the land and how to guarantee women's rights in society, investigating

the state and non-state actors for perspectives on women's place. A rating system of 1-5 was used to evaluate each social context in its perspective towards women's rights and activism.

Sarah Swick highlighted the Moroccan experience where women have lobbied for democratic inclusion for women working outside the normal political scene. But even though in 1998, thirty seats were open for women in parliament and another 35 were elected by the years 2002-2003, women managed to win only 0.5% of local representation. This is mainly because the Ulama issued a fatwa and declared that women's participation was unlawful.

John Keane investigated the history of democracy since its origins in the Near East. He argued that it contained different and conflicting accounts of why democracy is desirable. Therefore, with emphasis on contemporary Muslim thought, he highlighted some basic philosophical and political confusion and showed the need for fresh thinking about democracy.

Nilofar Sakhi discussed the many challenges in the Muslim world concerning Shari'ah law and the limits of state power inside Muslim society. He gave examples from recent democratic progress in Afghanistan and Turkey which brought very positive changes in the country like women's rights, stable political systems and free markets, etc.

Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad stated that three obstacles require special attention if progress towards democracy is to be facilitated. (1) There must be a change in US foreign policy so that American actions do not contradict American professions of a desire for democracy in the Middle East; (2) the discourse must be modified to directly address the concerns and objections of Islamists; and (3) a new strategy must be formulated that aims not at immediate results, but at changing long-term attitudes. He argued that Muslims must

abandon some long-cherished interpretations that conflict not only with Western notions of individual rights, but with the fundamental notion of the individual's direct responsibility to God.

Saeed Khan argued that the United States and the early Islamic community of Medina are two examples of societies that drafted and enacted constitutions to address their respective communities' needs. He analyzed the conditions that warranted the enactment of the Constitution of Medina during the Prophetic period and its attempt to provide a political structure to a community where such constructs were essential to its viability and survival. He finally compared the two constitutions and the effect each had on the future political conformation of each society.

Shaznene Hussain argued that elements within Islam can and should be combined with secular democratic ideals to create moderate and progressive democratic societies in the Muslim world. She examined the potential for religious leaders, the 'ulama', to be a progressive and moderating force in Islam, and in Egyptian society in particular. "Even though the 'ulama' have not always acted as a moderating force, their potential to do so has always been great" she said. She argued that the Egyptian 'ulama can help to counter political repression and Islamic extremism in a country where numerous groups are enmeshed in a battle to determine the role of Islam in politics.

At the end of the conference, Radwan Masmoudi, CSID President, Najib Ghadhbian, Chair of the Program Committee and Asma Afsaruddin, Chair of CSID, thanked the participants for their contributions and persistence which enriched the discussions throughout the two days.

To read any of the Conference Papers, please go to: <http://csidonline.org/>

The Damascus Spring

Dr. Kamal Labwani was interviewed on Oct. 26, 2005, at the CSID Office, in Washington DC. He was arrested two weeks later upon his return to Syria, where he is still in jail.

Muslim Democrat: Warm greetings to our honorable guest Dr. Kamal Labwani. Kindly introduce yourself to our readers.

Kamal Labwani: I am a medical doctor from Syria. I am 50 years old. I studied medicine at Damascus University. I have been a member of the Syrian Opposition since my student days at the university, in other words from 1976. I was imprisoned in 2001, and was released a year ago. My sentence lasted 3 years.

MD: What were the charges?

KL: I was charged with inciting against the Syrian authorities with spreading false rumors with the intent of weakening society's morale during war-time, as well as other charges. In reality, the government wanted to prevent us from moving forward with our objectives of reform and the advancement towards democracy. In 2001, the Spring of Damascus Movement was seized. Ten members were arrested and I was one of them. I was released from prison one year ago and have since returned to my political activities and social/political activism. Six of my dearest friends and colleagues are still in prison.

MD: Could you please brief us on the goals and activities of your party?

KL: We at the Spring of Damascus tried to develop new values in the political field, and a collection of new modes of thinking. A nation does not come to be as a result of foreign ambitions, it begins with the citizen (who has rights and obligations), who enters

into agreement with other citizens to form a state, to form a system and laws. Liberal thought rests on the idea that the individual is where it all begins. This does not mean that group rights should be disregarded or nullified; it means that we must begin with the individual. So every law and constitution that does not guarantee individual rights is a defiled social contract. This is the foundation of liberal thought. So we propose liberalism not because we wish to rid ourselves of values, religion or identity. We propose it to be free, because our society suffers from authoritarianism, and oppression.

There is no escaping democracy any longer. There isn't a single person ... even the dictator calls himself a democrat. So democracy has become the expectation... the principles of democracy have become a mainstream demand. The people determine their own fate through regularly held elections, freely elected legislative councils, free political parties, freedom of the press and the media, and of course, rule of law.

MD: Which major political parties or movements have supported the declaration?

KL: First and foremost is the National Democratic Assembly. They are comprised of leftists as well as nationalists. They were the most prominent. There were also national symbols as well as other unions that were established after the Spring of Damascus, such as the Free Nationalists; the Liberal Assembly; the National Dialogue Forum as well as the Council for the Revival of Civil Society. In addition, enlightened and moderate Islamic movements contributed, albeit less directly, and went on to back us. Most foreign-based opposition movements supported us as well such as the Reform Party and the National Council in America and



Kamal Labwani, now jailed in Syria

Germany, the Party for Modernity, and many Kurdish democratic fronts (not all of them) lent their support. Many Syrian religious leaders and scholars did as

well. For instance Sheikh Jawdat Said, a well known figure, represents a segment of young enlightened and religious men. So when we say **Jawdat Said**, we are referring to a group of people that he represents; that he is a symbol for.

MD: You mentioned Islamists, or Islamic trends. Can you tell us more about where they stand on the issue of democracy?

KL: The Muslim Brotherhood is a long-standing political party that participated in the establishment of democracy in Syria in the 1950's. It was a prominent component of it, participated in elections, had its representatives and was a legitimate political party. The movement was popular and had a strong presence. However, it was suppressed amidst all the political instability and military oppression, and was hijacked by a militia that had been responsible for several acts of violence in Syria. This militia is not the Muslim Brotherhood. The group that caused violence in the late 70's and 80's is not the Muslim Brotherhood. However, when the authority wanted to suppress it, it indiscriminately suppressed all who had an ideology. Therefore this enlightened political party has participated, is participating, and will participate in the democratization of Syria. It will guard political initiatives towards democracy by pulling the rug from under extremist and violent movements. There are extremist and violent Islamic movements

After Terror

Edited by Akbar Ahmed and Brian Forst



Akbar Ahmed
CSID Board Member

BOOK REVIEW by Bina Shah

After the recent bombings in London, it feels odd to be reviewing a book called *'After Terror'*; in today's world, terror never seems to end. But this book of 28 specially-commissioned essays from some of the world's greatest thinkers, activists, and writers, edited by university professors Akbar Ahmed and Brian Forst, should be required reading for anyone who believes that terrorism can be defeated by the forces of tolerance, respect, and goodwill. If you are one of them, read on.

The theme of this book as outlined in an essay by its editors is that there is an alternative to the "clash of civilisations" that Samuel P Huntington described in his book of the same name. "The creation of enemies is essential to cultural identity," said Huntington, but the authors of these essays are unanimously aligned in their opposition to this theory.

This premise can be further broken down into three major themes: the underlying causes of conflict in the world are intolerance; there is a vital and urgent need to expand the dialogue between civilisations, in order to defuse tensions and avert a clash; and that there is a dire need to identify poor governance and to improve it in order to deal with the very real threat of terror and its many manifestations in today's world.

Examining the authors of the essays is like reading a roll-call of the world's most eminent thinkers, intellectuals, and leaders: Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Prince El Hassan bin Talal, Bernard Lewis

and Joseph Nye Jr, Zbigniew Brzezinski and Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks are among the contributors. But do the essays present anything new or meaningful to the reader, or are they merely re-hashing of what has been said over and over again since September 11, 2001?

It is a question that is not easily answered at first. Going back to the major themes of the book, one might find them rather self-evident; but the authors of these essays take pains to explain the nuances and subtleties, as well as illustrate how

"Will America seek to dominate the world, or lead it?"

their own experiences and reflections have helped shape their beliefs. For example, the late Sergio Vieira de Mello (who was killed last year in Iraq), in his essay "Civilisation, Human Rights, and Collective Responsibility," writes movingly about his experiences as the UN Commissioner for Human Rights and describes having seen "the best and worst of what we have to offer to each other."

Perhaps the most brilliant of the essays in this collection is Zbigniew Brzezinski's "The Simple Power of Weakness, The Complex Vulnerability of Power." This essay, powerfully and forcefully written, reminds one of just what a genius the former National Security Advisor is in the field of strategic studies, and is an excellent observation of America's political and global strategies in dealing with terrorism and the positive

role America can play as a global leader. "An anxious America, obsessed with its own security, could find itself isolated in the world, the focus of global hatred. . . Will America seek to dominate the world, or lead it?"

Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks both look at the role of religion in promoting either tolerance or intolerance. Tutu finds that religion can "produce saints or rogues . . . yet all emphasise fundamental morals of honesty, fidelity . . . compassion, the unity of humankind, and peace," suggesting that there is indeed a "convergence of basic values and interests" throughout the world. Meanwhile, Rabbi Sacks sees religion as something that can create conflict but also unite people in their connection to God, which gives them a universal moral compass with peace and brotherhood as its North and South stars. Shashi Tharoor identifies the media as a key player in the way people perceive and understand one another (or fail to) across borders; Joseph Nye Jr fascinates with his analysis of "hard" and "soft" power and how cultural exchanges and education will deprive terrorism of its supporters.

After Terror offers observations, experiences, and ideas that go beyond the ordinary, and promises to satisfy those who fear that there is only one knee-jerk reaction to the terror attacks of 9/11 and the events that have followed it. Thirty eminent thinkers from around the world believe otherwise: this is your chance to find out why.



Center for the Study of Islam & Democracy
 1625 Massachusetts Ave. N.W., Suite 601
 Washington, DC 20036-2212
 Tel.: (202) 265-1200
 Fax: (202) 265-1222
 www.islam-democracy.org

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INTERVIEW WITH KAMAL LABWANI *cont. from Page 9*

that have rejected and continue to reject dialogue. They do this because they suffer from inherent and difficult political conditions. But if there is democracy in Syria, I believe that such movements will fade away

MD: Could you shed some light on your activities and the results you've had on this trip?

KL: Some Europeans have reservations about democratization fearing that it will open the country to chaos. I do not believe this fear to be innocent or naïve. In other words, I do not believe it to be a legitimate warning or fear as much as it is an excuse to not support democratization. Regardless, such opinions do not represent the majority. Most European countries today say that they have a real need for reform and democracy in Syria, and have pledged to back this reform and not engage in any dealings with the Syrian authority. It is our duty to reassure them that Syrian society is open-minded, civilized, rejects all forms of violence, and is a society that wants to live if only it would be given the chance. Put differently, it is in your hands today to either push the Syrian people towards extremism or to pull them towards civility; reform and so forth.

MD: Do you think that the Muslim Brotherhood have the right to establish a political party and participate in politics?

KL: In principle, religion is one thing and politics is another. It is the right of the Ikhwan to form a religious and cultural

congregation that calls for Islam and its principles. This is a natural, legitimate and undeniable right. However, its entry into political life must take place via a political platform, and via a political party that accepts all citizens independent of religion. This last condition is very sensitive and specific. In order to enter elections, we cannot enter as god's emissaries.

Rather, they must present a single political platform and program. I personally prefer, so as to safeguard the solidarity of society, that whoever presents a political platform should take part in the elections, and may the best platform win. If the *Ikhwan* come forth with a political platform - they may even ally themselves with other parties - then by all means, they are welcome.

MD: But the fear that many people have is that the *Ikhwan* promise democracy before they assume power, but once they attain power, they will turn against democracy. How do you respond to such concerns?

KL: The likelihood that this will happen in Syria is very small, and even if it does happen, I will be fine with it. For them to rise to power by virtue of a just and fair election is in itself an achievement. If they go back on their word and turn against democracy, they will pay the price and lose their popularity. And in the same way we resisted against a fascist and oppressive regime, we will again resist against a religious regime.

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