

American Enterprise Institute

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[Edited transcript from audio tapes]

8:45 a.m. Registration and
Breakfast

9:00 *Introduction:* Danielle Pletka, AEI
Opening Remarks: Shafeeq Ghabra, Alghad Communication/Leadership and Policy Institute; founding president, American University of Kuwait, Kuwait

9:15 **Panel I: Challenges to Reform in Syria and Lebanon**
Panelists: Ammar Abdulhamid, Dar Emar Publishing House, Syria
Hassan Mneimneh, Iraq Memory Foundation, Lebanon
Najat Sharafeddine, Future Television, Lebanon
Lokman Slim , Hayya Bina [Let's Go!], Lebanon
Moderator: Danielle Pletka, AEI

10:30 **Panel II: Challenges to Reform in Iraq and Jordan**
Panelists: Sama Hadad, Iraqi Prospect Organization, Iraq
Jamil Nimri, Al Ghad, Jordan
Moderator: Michael Rubin, AEI

11:30 **Update from Yemen**
Speaker: Hafez al-Bukari, Yemen Polling Center, Yemen

11:40 *Closing Remarks:* Nejib Chebbi, Progressive Democratic Party, Tunisia

Noon Luncheon

Proceedings:

Danielle Pletka: Good morning, everybody. I'm Danielle Pletka, I'm the vice president of AEI for foreign and defense policy studies. Let me welcome you to this second in our series on "Dissent and Reform in the Arab World." As many of you know who have been here before or followed this project, this is a project that we started a couple years ago with the aid of a board of directors from the Middle East, with the participation of people from the Arab world, to talk about issues of dissent and reform, and obstacles to reform in their own countries. That's what you're going to see here today.

In our last group we had people from North Africa and around the Middle East. Today we have, again, people from a variety of countries. But to open our conference this morning, I'm very proud to introduce Shafeeq Ghabra, who is a good and old friend, a man of great principle and personal courage. He is the chairman and CEO of Al Ghad Communications, Leadership and Policy Institute. He was the founding president of the American University of Kuwait and professor of political science there. He is the former director of the Center of Strategic and Future Studies at Kuwait University and of the Kuwait Information Office in Washington, D.C., from which many of us know him. He's going to open the conference this morning and then he will join the panel, at which point afterwards he will take questions should you have them.

Shafeeq Ghabra: Good morning. Nice to see many of you and thanks, Danielle, for inviting me. I thank the American Enterprise Institute for this program.

It's a complex Middle East. You all understand, I think, after going through what everybody has gone through over the last few years. Ibn Arabi, the thirteenth-century Muslim mystic, indicated in many of his writings, but in one of them he indicated that notions of truth have confused the learned of Islam, every Jewish rabbi, every Christian priest. This saying is true today in our present Middle East, as Arabs are caught between having to confront their own truths – namely, the challenges of progress – and to engage at the same time in a historical self-reflection or self-evaluation.

The Arab world has reached a crisis point. Due to lack of vision, lack of strategy, it seems that we still feel, we still are, sitting on the fence while the world is moving in many different directions. I keep reminding myself that humanity has evolved exactly in response to challenges like these, at least like the ones today faced in the Middle East. It may be ironic that those who die today in the wars of the region will not experience what many humans yearn for, which is to live in peace and prosperity with the self and with the neighbors.

I read the "Arab Future Report," which was released at the end of the 1980s, for those who are young enough to remember. That particular report, done then by the Center of Arab Unity Studies – Saad Eddin Ibrahim was involved, in fact, in this particular report – warned against civil wars, failed states, corruption, lack of democracy, anger, frustration – the entire set of things that could happen. Many of us read it; some believed it, some did not. However, in 2003, more than a decade and a half later, the UNDP report comes again and talks about in extensive detail the deficit in knowledge, in education, in human rights and women's rights, in youth, you name it.

So it seems that the Middle East policies, style, ways of thinking, approaches, and strategies have not changed much since the 1970s. The same road has been traveled once and twice and three times, in a repetitive commitment to that particular road. It is clear that this road has gotten us nowhere.

To change, it requires courage. To change, it requires a shift in paradigm. To change, it requires lots of risks. To change, it means there is a possibility of failure. But what failure is going to add to the existing failure coming from following the same path of the last fifty years?

In his famous poem, "The Road Less Traveled," Robert Frost wrote about two roads that diverged in a yellow wood, and he took the one less traveled, and that has made all the difference. The Middle East today provides sources of optimism. It equally provides sources of concern, real concern. The balance between them is up to us to determine, depending how you look at things. But there is some sort of a balance and therefore the possibility of a road less traveled that could lead to something positive is still there. The Middle East could still come around.

Let me go through a set of points. I've accumulated a number of them. I will share them with you, given the time, and I hope we have three hours.

Political liberalization is first. Political liberalization is gaining some ground, with steps being taken in countries including Egypt, Morocco, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Gulf Cooperation Council. More participation is coming. Just recently Kuwait passed through a unique constitutional crisis. The parliament played a very central role in addressing and resolving that constitutional crisis peacefully. That sets some sort of a tradition. Women's rights have been gained just recently. They will be voting soon in the municipality election but also in the coming elections in 2007. That's one.

Two, most countries have begun liberalizing their economies and recognizing the role of the private sector. The significance of such liberalization is the dynamic it creates. It still can be hijacked by the status quo. It still can be hijacked by extremists. But it is still something that can lead to lots of progress that we have seen in other regions of the world.

Three, the Hamas electoral victory could allow a political process that could lead to maturity in Palestinian politics. This could have implications for the region and it could have implications for the Islamists of the region. We can't do much about it besides engaging, because if we don't engage, then we let them go their way and we will have our way, and we will never meet anywhere. It will only add to the problem. Engagement could change – could change Hamas and could change others. In fact, that particular victory of Hamas may have helped abort an intifada by many Palestinians against the same Palestinian Authority for lack of professionalism and good governance. Still, Abu Mazen was around for some time. He was not given exactly the chance he should have been given from the powers that should have been engaged in a more committed way toward the peace process.

Fourth, the Israeli policy of disengagement from one side could lead to further conflict and new rounds of violence. The hope for a peaceful settlement should not be marginalized. That hope should be kept alive.

Five, Lebanon is regaining its political identity after thirty years of Syrian occupation and control. It could become a liberal model for the region in the same manner it used to be in the 1950s and 1960s. Somehow I feel that the recovery of the region and the recovery of Lebanon are very much interconnected, the result of psychological, cultural, human reasons for this interconnectivity. So Lebanon should not be left alone.

Six, the U.S. and its allies are currently on a conflictual course with Syria. Even if the regime can adapt to the pressures in the short term – Syria is under tremendous pressure to cooperate with the investigation – I believe things will not be the same in Syria in the coming months and years. Something has changed and there will be more coming.

Seven, governments in the region are beginning to recognize that religion cannot remain as politicized as it is today. The region's attention is increasingly focusing on religious messages, the mosques, prayers, what is said, what is not said. There is a bigger awareness of the dangers of interpretations that are very radical of religion.

Eight, al Qaeda has been badly damaged as an organization and the Arab countries should be able to deal with al Qaeda from many different ways, at least in the tightening of security and helping the assurances for civil society. Yet while its institutional base has been challenged, the goal of the Islamic movement – which is not al Qaeda, it's a different form of Islamic movements and representation – is still to gain power.

Ten, the Islamic jihadists or warriors or whatever one wants to use as a name, have been highly skilled in their use of symbols and their ability to appeal. These symbols, looking at bin Laden and the cave behind him, comparing with the big powers or the presidents or the monarchs, there is this symbolism. You could see that in Marxism-Leninism and in Communism and in the Che Guevara message. You can see it in so many other messages of protest movements. So there is a lot of usage of symbolism that one has to be aware of.

Eleven, the Arab street nonetheless still finds certain nobility in this movement, the al Qaeda movement. Even if major terrorist attacks do not occur, the implicit passivity of the Muslim environment is still an issue. Unless important elements in the Muslim world and societies stand up to defuse the situation, the rest of the world could possibly assimilate all the Arab worlds into strengthening religious and cultural prejudices through supporting or an image of supporting such movements.

Twelve, Saudi Arabia has recognized many of the dilemmas that contributed to September 11 and the dangers of extremism. More moderation in Islamic interpretation is projected today from Saudi Arabia. I'm not saying that's the end of it, but there is something different in the message coming from Saudi Arabia.

Thirteen, a main factor in the changes in the region has been American pressure. But it seems that the U.S. zeal is fading away, putting the drive to reform as well at risk.

Fourteen, if the U.S. withdraws from Iraq in the present conditions, this will be seen as a victory for the extremists, of all fundamentalism in the region. It will lead to major setbacks. I think what the U.S. needs to do is to listen more to the pulse of the region and to listen more to expertise and to find new ways of addressing the situation, not only in Iraq but in the region.

Fifteen, the oil wealth pouring into the producer countries is being better distributed and better invested these days. The oil wealth flowing into the Arab states can be seen as a third chance to

create a different kind of economic development in the Middle East. The surplus enjoyed by the oil exporters is massive today, \$400 billion in 2005 – it's four times more than 2002.

Sixteen, Dubai and the UAE have shown the Gulf States that you can develop, you can create an engine for institutions and services. In many ways, Dubai has become a place where many Arab youth, men and women, would like to go and work and seek a professional life.

Seventeen, Arab youth is getting organized and seeking change. The young are not caught in the mindset of the elders. They will reject dictatorships and extremism as they seek a different connection to a world that is changing. They are still lacking in leadership, lacking in message, lacking in confidence, but they are different. Any one of us who interacts with those who are under 30 or under 25 sees that difference today.

Eighteen, nongovernmental organizations and civil society are on the rise in the region. They could eventually play quite a role in providing a different setup of cultures and participation.

Nineteen, while an escalating confrontation is taking place between the United States of America and Iran that cannot be excluded that this escalation is slowly moving somewhere. In the longer term, Iranian politics and the Iranian state will pass into the hands of second-generation revolutionary leaders who are far more pragmatic, far different from what we see today. There is a change in the society itself and one can see that evolving.

Twenty, it is not in anyone's interest – either Iraqis, nor Syria, nor Saudi Arabia, nor Iran – to see Iraq go into three different pieces. It is clear that many of the states in the region would like to see the United States in trouble, but at the same time for good reasons they fear the sectarian conflict and its impact on their populations. The insurgency is not likely to go away in Iraq. The best hope is rather it will dwindle over time. More or less, Iraq will stabilize with time. However, the strategy for Iraq seems to be clearer today than it was before. Many of the things that happened should not have happened, but there is more clarity today and relevance in comparison to what existed a few days ago.

Twenty-one, the Arab world is today less radical, less passionate toward that radicalism, relative to previous years. But it is a numb situation, and you feel that numbness in the Arab world. Maybe that numbness is also in Washington and maybe it is all over the world.

Twenty-two, expansion in the media in the Arab world is phenomenal and it's on the rise, and there will be more impact by the media. The Internet, equally true, is on the rise and there is more impact by the Internet. If that impact is not felt through the Internet for a certain age group, it's definitely true for the young people of the Middle East. Not only chatting but so many other dimensions of knowledge and information and exchange.

Twenty-three, the expansion in education is also huge in the Middle East. The expansion in English-based education, American-style education, is very serious, and it's all over the Middle East, all over the area. Reform, as well, in educational systems. I will name three countries in particular that have been able to move ahead: Jordan, Morocco, and Qatar have been doing a lot in educational reform recently.

Conclusion. Sorry to give you that long list, but that's only to brainstorm and to make it easier for the panel to deal with the many questions that will come probably from many different directions. So this is a decade of transition. This is a decade of transition in the Middle East. It is a decade of change. Many events, different wars, multiple elections, and major shifts. The inventory of this situation reflects sentiments and reality in the Middle East. The tensions created are normal in this grand scheme of things. However, recognizing progress and change as a challenge is one thing, but derailing it due to our inability to think ahead or plan or strategize is another.

We have an opportunity to act in the interests of our people, our communities, our countries, our neighbors, and the globe. This opportunity should not be lost. I believe it will not come again. We are not going to have again an opportunity that shocks the world, whether it is people like Saddam Hussein and the evilness of his level or an act as evil as September 11. It's the perfect storm. But we have not yet come up with the perfect answer. It's such a complex process. That's why it's a process that could lead to a new socioeconomic, political reality in the Middle East that can take us to a new horizon, to become a region that is more at ease with itself and more at ease with the world.

But this is a road not traveled, a road less traveled. I think we need to travel it together and find that way as we go through the journey. Thank you.

Panel 1: Challenges to Reform in Syria and Lebanon

Michael Rubin: Before I introduce the panelists, I do want to talk a minute about the people that weren't able to be with us today. Issam Abu Isa, who's the director of the Palestine International Bank, was unable to get his visa on time. He had previously tried to come to testify about Palestinian Authority corruption in the House Banking Committee. False information was passed suggesting he had links he didn't have. But as many people know, once you're on a black list with regard to U.S. visas, it's very difficult to get off. But we're not going to rest until that happens and we expect him at our next panel. There are many people in government working on this right now.

Rami Nasrallah, our other Palestinian representative, is not here for much happier reasons: his wife is in an advanced state of pregnancy, has been ordered to bed rest. Given the opportunity to stay with her, he made the right decision and he stayed with her. We wish him and his wife all the best with their baby.

Fathi al-Jami, just an update, the brother of Muhammad al-Jami, who spoke here last time, remains in Libyan prison, unable to be accessed by any independent observers. Again, President Bush on March 12, 2004, had cited the case of Fathi al-Jami as one of the indications that Libya was changing. He was rearrested two weeks later and there has been no forthcoming statement.

Last but not least, I wanted to draw your attention to the case of Neila Charchour Hachicha, who has been harassed nonstop, her family harassed, by the Tunisian government since she spoke

here last time, as a result of what she said and also of her interview on Al Jazeera. We had a meeting with some Tunisian government representatives the other day in which they assured us that she was a person of no consequence. With all due respect to the Tunisian Embassy and to President Ben Ali, in any country that claims to be a democracy, there is no such thing as a citizen of no consequence. We will not stop fighting for her and for the harassment to end. There should be no punishment for freedom of speech.

With no more further delay, I want to introduce our panelists briefly. Their full biographies are in your packets.

We're going to start off with Ammar Abdulhamid from the Dar Emar Publishing House in Syria. Many people have seen his quite courageous blog. When he was blogging from Syria, he gained quite the following. It's the sort of boldness that we're thrilled to have Ammar here today.

Following Ammar, Lokman Slim from Hayya Bina will be speaking. He's coming from Lebanon and he will be talking about the challenges posed by Hezbollah in the Lebanese system.

Najat Sharafeddine since 1993 has been working as both a news editor and an anchor for Future Television in Lebanon. She's come to particular prominence because of her truly excellent interviews following the murder of Rafiq Hariri and so forth.

Lastly, Hassan Mneimneh from the Iraq Memory Foundation will be speaking a little bit about the time bombs and the minefields that still exist in the path for dissent and reform in Lebanon. With no more further ado, I turn the floor over to Ammar.

Ammar Abdulhamid: Thank you, Michael. Thank you for inviting me. Eight minutes should be enough really. I want to make just a very brief outline of the obstacles facing reform in Syria.

Basically there are two main obstacles. One of them is the regime. From the very beginning, I am immediately debunking the message of reform from within the regime. I will explain in a minute. The second one is the nature, up until recently at least, the nature of the opposition, which exhibited many of the same symptoms of ossification that the regime has. But they seem finally in the last few months in particular to have broken away a little bit from that mold and to be heading in new directions.

The regime is – even under Bashar al-Assad, and despite the fact that there are a lot of people who still want to see in his congeniality every now and then – some journalist meets with him or he comes up on TV and people tend to see in his ability to, I don't know, smile and be nice as a sign of reform. I think that really speaks a lot about how things were basically under Hafez al-Assad, who was very stern basically. If you contrast to Bashar's congeniality with his father's sternness, to a lot of people this is interpreted as a sign of reform. But after five years I hope these kinds of illusions are no longer with us, but they are at least in some circles.

But unfortunately, if you look at the actual things that have been done over the last five years, you will see that the technocrats in the Syrian regime – the good ones – are very few indeed.

The regime has not been able to produce any new technocrats. All of the existing technocrats that are being held as reformers in the regime are not Ba'athists. So in a sense the regime is admitting publicly that the Ba'ath Party does not produce anymore, is not capable of producing the right people to champion any kind of reform.

At the same time, whatever technocrats that exist today, like for instance the deputy prime minister, Abdullah Dardari, whose appointment has been hailed as a major step of reform, can do nothing really except make pronouncements about what the future is going to be and about what their goals in general are. They give us all these nice figures that are belied by the reality as we live day to day in Syria.

In five years, the living standards have been going down rather than improving, despite the fact that every now and then the government does tend to raise the salaries of public state employees. The economy is in shambles despite the fact that we do have some private banks opening, but they are really operating more as piggy banks really. They are not capable of doing any of the modern banking operations expected of them, such as investment or loans. Despite the fact that for the last three years we've been talking about the stock market, we still don't have a stock market, only a plan for a stock market in the country.

It seems to be that the corruption of the regime, the endemic corruption of the Assad family itself basically – we are talking about the brother, the cousin, the brother-in-law – it's really a family affair. The endemic corruption has become the topic of street talk. Everybody talks about it, everybody names names. There are no taboos here. It seems to me this is really the problem. The regime has narrowed down further and further the circle of decision-makers to a group of family members who seem to be trying to sort of buy out the country.

A recent cartoon that was released through the Internet mocking the situation, saying the Syrian yellow pages, and in it the president's cousin basically – his name is Maklouf – who always ends up showing up and buying different properties and whatever. So the new yellow pages will be Maklouf Airlines, Maklouf Taxi, Maklouf Shawarma Stand – everything is Maklouf. And Maklouf is known to be a front for Bashar, so in this case you have a president and a leadership who are busy really buying the country and dividing it between the family members.

So with this kind of regime, no reforms can be expected. It's very much a Mafioso regime. It's not a question – in fact, I made the mistake a while ago, and my colleague Flynt Leveritt and other people have also been on the same page, of saying that, is Bashar going to be Michael Corleone or Fredo Corleone? I don't think it really matters anymore because he's a Corleone in the final analysis. We don't want that kind of a situation. This is not something that will lead in any way to reform.

The other main obstacle to reform is the inability of the opposition to break out of its ossification. We have the same old figures, the same old rhetoric, and the same old style of communication and of acting still purveying the very circles of the opposition in Syria. Their rhetoric and discourse is never aimed at the Syrian people. They don't try to address the people. President, please reform. Oh, President, please do this, give us that. It doesn't work that way, of course, and you cannot beg for freedom, no matter how hard you beg.

I think only in the last year or so, especially after the issuance of the Damascus Declaration, was the opposition able to finally come to terms with the fact that they need to really make a complete break with the regime at this stage. At least a philosophical break. We can never isolate every figure in the regime and say we will never talk and this entire regime, with the apparatuses, with the army people, with every Baathist, has to go. It's not going to happen this way. We're always going to have to find ways of trying to communicate with the regime figures and get them to our side of thinking. But at least the upper echelon as they exist right now – at least the Assad family seems to be out of, at least as far as the opposition is concerned, not to be looked at as a source of hope of any sort.

I'll go back to this, however, in a few more minutes, but let's also say that the opposition has not been able to reinvent itself in the media. They have not really been able to make an effective use of the media. One problem is the lack of access, I admit that of course. On the other hand, even when they do have access, they have not really come up with a media message. They have not been able to come up with a media strategy that will enable them to get their message to the Syrian people more effectively or even to the outside world more effectively. So this is a failure that they really need to remedy. Up until now, they have not really been able to do so. It seems to be that the opposition on the outside will have to do that job, since they have greater access, more freedom to work and communicate.

Right now, in the last few months, the Syrian regime has been feeling so much under pressure that they have widened the scope of their crackdown against activists. Every activist that came to or left the country and went to attend an opposition conference, whether it's in Paris or Brussels or Washington, D.C. – in late February, for instance – were detained, all barred from traveling. A lot of young activists – I'm going to say that one of the points is that the opposition has not really been able to involve a lot of young people. Recently in the last few months, they have been able to actually bridge that barrier and get more new faces and young faces, but all of them ended up in jail. The regime is making sure that the opposition's reach into the student community, for instance, and to campuses and to young professional associations remains pretty limited. The intimidation tactics are underway.

Basically, the third major failure of the opposition is the fact that they have not been able to announce any clear programs for reform. Once again, I have to say that the last few months might have shown a different strategy in this regard. A bridge between the internal and external opposition has finally been made and it was made, in fact, here in Washington, D.C., in a conference at the end of February, where main opposition figures from inside came and met with opposition figures here in the United States. Those who were not able to come joined us by phone conference for a few hours. They include the main names basically, the so-called Damascus Spring prisoners, just fresh out of prison, three days after prison. They were with us on the phone, joining our coalition. Some of those who attended were barred from traveling once they returned home and one of them right now is in prison. Three are in and out of imprisonment.

It's going to be very difficult now and this is a very critical phase. I will wrap up by saying that the last development we have seen in the opposition, which is the formation of a front that combines the former VP Khaddam and the head of the Muslim Brotherhood, seems also to

indicate – seems to have galvanized the external opposition scene. That gives some hope for the pragmatic elements at least that there is something to break the stalemate. It's not an ideal solution for a liberal to be working with Islamists or even ex-members of the regime.

But as I said, the pragmatic solution is if you want to protect the state and the unity of the state and not fall into some kind of civil war, and not sort of stand on our high ideals and therefore be excluded from the political process, the new developing political process, the best way will be for this front that seems to combine liberal elements, leftist elements, Baathist elements and Islamist elements to actually form. It might actually pose a serious challenge to the regime on account of the experiences and the inner knowledge that Mr. Khaddam has of the regime and the fact that the noose seems to be tightening around the Assad regime as the investigation into the Hariri murder continues apace and as the international community, especially world governments like France and the United States, seems to have really finally realized that you cannot work with the Syrian regime and that an alternative is going to be needed anytime soon. So the next few months should be very critical in this regard.

Lokman Slim: Thank you. Michael apportioned to each of us eight minutes, so I neither have the time to thank him as well as AEI staff, not to take my time or your time. So I will go through some short considerations about Hezbollah in order to show how this organization represents a big obstacle to reform in Lebanon. Dr. Shafeeq Ghabra said how much Lebanon is important as a model for the other Middle Eastern countries.

My starting point will be the decision taken by the U.S. Department of the Treasury on the 23rd of March designating Hezbollah TV and radio station as the media arms of a terrorist network. I think that this decision is enough to make us consider Hezbollah neither like a kind of ordinary tribal terrorist organization nor only as an Iranian proxy. It's something much more complicated.

A few days later, UN Envoy Terje Larsen said, "Our goal is to integrate Hezbollah into the Lebanese Army." By way of comment, the Lebanese leader Walid Jumblatt proposed – said it's easier to integrate the Lebanese army into Hezbollah rather than Hezbollah to the Lebanese army.

I think both issuances of the Department of Treasury and Mr. Jumblatt deserve to be taken very seriously. At least they are indicative of the feeble state of Lebanese sovereignty post-Beirut Spring and of the growing dynamic influence of Hezbollah. Let's remember that this debate about the future of the Hezbollah militia is taking place almost five years after the Israeli unilateral withdrawal from South Lebanon. In fact, May 2000 marked a turning point in Lebanon's political landscape. While Israeli forces occupied southern Lebanon, Hezbollah enjoyed ample justification for its armed presence as a resistance movement. The Israeli withdrawal should have undercut such a movement's *raison d'être* and its justification for maintaining its arms. Unfortunately, Hezbollah, who has always struggled to protect its exceptionalism, did not step backwards. Soon after the Israeli withdrawal, Hezbollah started military operations in the Shabaa Farm, a strip between Lebanon, Syria and Israel whose legality is not totally proved.

So today, in 2006, Hezbollah is a kind of resistance movement in search of an occupation, much more than a resistance confronting an occupation.

Saying that, we cannot reduce Hezbollah to its terrorist, military aspect. Hezbollah is much more complicated as such. It's a complex political, religious, propaganda movement, operating in a more complex country. Lebanon is indeed among the smallest Arab countries but also among the most complicated. Lebanon is sometimes described as a museum of religions, referring to the 18 officially recognized religious communities.

However, this poetic description hides some interesting figures. The last census took place in Lebanon under French mandate in 1932. The census showed that there was 30 percent Maronites – to talk about the three main communities – 22 percent Sunnis, and 20 percent Shiite. An estimate of 1986 shows that the population now is 41 percent Shiite, 27 percent Sunni and only 16 percent Maronite. That is to say that when we talk about the Shiite and about the Hezbollah and about the hegemony of Hezbollah over the Shiite, we are talking in a way about the future of Lebanon and not only about a community. Especially if we take into consideration the high level of births and what we call now the Shiite crescent in formation from Iran to Beirut.

Hezbollah of course inspires fear because of its arms, but also it inspires fear because of its monopoly of the Shiite representation. In this sense, Hezbollah represents the biggest obstacle to reform in Lebanon. Hezbollah influence is not exerted just by terrorist or by physical pressure. Hezbollah is building up a kind of mini-state within the Lebanese state. It is providing social services, health care and even is controlling, for example, the biggest chain of shops selling clothing for women. It's to say how much its influence is getting bigger.

All these services function like a kind of umbilical cord between Hezbollah and the population. It's what enables it to mobilize tens of thousands in organized political marches and demonstrations. It also explains to a certain extent its electoral successes, especially the last one in 2005.

I would like to quote, how to sum up the obstacles that Hezbollah represents. I think we can sum them up in two major points. Hezbollah is always making a priority of external factors, especially by over-exaggerating the so-called Israeli/Zionist threat. It's the same strategy as all the Arab totalitarian regimes who found in their fight against Israel an excuse to block reforms. Hezbollah today in Lebanon is acting in the same way.

Second, Hezbollah is a bad example to the other confessional groups and political parties in Lebanon and the region. The model of Hezbollah, the model of monopolizing the representation of a community, keeping it under tight control, is really functioning as a bad model, at least in Lebanon, where all other communities are feeling that Hezbollah contains the successful recipe and are trying in a way to imitate it.

I want to end by asking, is it a hopeless cause? I don't think it's a hopeless cause, otherwise I will not be here talking to you. I think that at least three or four important measures could be taken.

First, we have to take advantage of the still ongoing precarious balance between the Lebanese community to help the Lebanese state – to help build up a Lebanese state which could represent a kind of counter-example of the one provided by Hezbollah.

Second, I think that we need deep constitutional amendments, ruling especially the parties and political groups. It's an arm which the civil society could use and could put a kind of barrier to some undemocratic parties like Hezbollah.

Last, but of course not least, Hezbollah is gaining time and it's part of its strategy to gain time. So we need to shorten this timeout which Hezbollah is now enjoying.

Najat Sharafeddine: Good morning, and thank you for inviting us for this lovely panel. I will talk about the harmful year in 2005 and the new birth that is hoped for Lebanon now.

After a series of bloody assassinations and massive demonstrations showing people's resistance to terror, the Lebanese are facing a challenge and an opportunity with the current regional and international circumstances: they could reconstitute their country on real democratic principles, in contrast to the current religious factions' fragile equilibrium - and in most of modern history non-equilibrium. Favoring group interests over the national interest has always been the trend in this country of 3-4 million, where official census is forbidden. This abets conflicts, war and instability, as 18 official religious sects run their own judicial systems for marriage, divorce, inheritance and the like. The constitution even restricts the highest-rank positions and allocates quotas for parliament seats to various religious sects.

Could the Lebanese make the necessary choices keeping their diversity and accepting each other as they are? Will regional and international players allow this to happen? Could the Lebanese consider their national interest a priority over foreign interests or over their own convictions? Would they refuse to go into civil wars or join other countries fighting their fellow citizens?

Stagnating with the current situation or worse is very easy. The first necessary and prerequisite stage for reviving the country is the implementation of many overdue items on the Taif Agreement that ended the civil war in 1989. This agreement was supported by the Arab League and especially Saudi Arabia, and also the United States. This includes, first, creating a senate to represent the various religious sects and establishing a modern democratic electoral law for the parliament reflecting the will of the people. This would make the various religious political powers more moderate and allow for the establishment of national parties that are open for all citizens.

Second, there is a need to cut off political intervention from the daily work of government institutions and services in order to allow proper audits on expenditures and public resources.

Third, Lebanon must establish a social treaty as a basis for citizenship. This means putting the notion of local development into action, increasing decentralization and promoting the feeling of citizenship and equal rights of citizens, and getting basic services and equal opportunities.

However, Lebanon is a tiny – only 10,452 square kilometers. It is bordered by Syria, Israel and the Mediterranean Sea. Some major items are not in the hands of the Lebanese alone, like resolving the 60-year-old problem of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees waiting in bad conditions on Lebanese land for the implementation of UN Resolution 194.

It is important to achieve a state of stability and respect along the 1949 truce lines with Israel which currently Israel violates in the sky and sea. Lastly, it is critical to reach a normal peer-to-peer relationship with Syria, Lebanon's neighbor to the east and north.

There are recent developments and hopes. The practice of democracy, instead of being in the hands of the people, is in the hands of the major religious political power brokers. This is widespread practice, as shown through consecutive conflicts in this country, a country in which civil marriage or non-religious marriage is not available.

Further, in an opinion poll in 2005, only 34 percent answered that in normal cases they belonged to Lebanon first before their confession. The same group, asked on their attitude in case of a major conflict, only 27 percent said that they consider Lebanon first.

A few months after UN Resolution 1559, the assassination of ex-Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri caught the country by surprise. Many said afterwards that he felt he was threatened. Approvers and critics of Hariri policies alike nonetheless considered him an ally who had stamped his name in Lebanon's history through university scholarships and relief efforts since the 1980s. Hariri was the visionary behind Beirut's central district and the achiever of major construction and infrastructure projects since the 1990s.

In response to his assassination, one-third of the Lebanese population took to the streets in March 2005. In addition, they were expressing their objection to Syrian meddling in Lebanese politics and security. Syrian troops swiftly withdrew in April 2005, responding to international pressure thus ending 13 years of participation in the ongoing war and another 15 years of supervising the partial implementation - and, some read it, the non-implementation - of the Taif Accord.

Lebanon was left for the first time since 1975 without a foreign military presence and dominant force in the political process. This near-ideal opportunity for the Lebanese to run their own affairs is not completely utilized. The new parliament in power since June 2005 and the resulting government has not yet come up with a clear vision of rebuilding a country based not on religious affiliation. Indeed, they do not yet have a consensus on the Lebanon each group wants, ranging from a secular country where citizenship is the main determinant of belonging to a federation of religious factions living together.

Weakened national institutions, poor party laws and a widening disparity in wealth distribution, as well as the lack of clear definition of the political and economic roles in the country are still present. Some of these major issues are being discussed in the Lebanese national dialogue which has been underway since March 2, 2006 - without foreign intervention for the first time.

The challenges are not easy to handle, especially some that have external dimensions. The success or failure in such dialogue catch the citizens' wishes and could have severe

consequences for the future of the country. The Lebanese have no false dreams for this dialogue to give them their aspired goals of democracy and development. However, most Lebanese simply hope to establish a peaceful mechanism for resolving internal conflicts and a unified attitude towards all external issues. Thanks.

Michael Rubin: Thank you very much, Najat. I want to turn the floor over to Hassan, who will talk a little bit more about Lebanon and also try to summarize the themes he's heard in some of the papers from our other participants.

Hassan Mneimneh: Thank you, Michael. The first thing I would say is something has indeed changed since the 1980s, in terms of projecting or trying to predict the future of the Arab world. We have to be very frank about this and we have to consider it. What has changed is that the grand narratives of the 1980s – leftism and nationalism – have moved to the side and have been replaced by a new grand narrative, which is Islamism; Islamism dominates Arab political discourse, which dominates Arab culture, and which currently has no serious contender.

There is no serious alternative to it. Therefore all the indicators that Professor Ghabra points to – positive ones that have to do with liberal reforms here, liberal reforms there, education, et cetera – are in jeopardy. For as long as there is no narrative, political culture cannot accept these reforms and anchor them in society; in this way, these advances can be extremely ephemeral and we can lose them once again.

The first item therefore that we need to keep in mind is that the current Arab political debate is dominated by Islamism without alternative. What then will be the alternative grand narrative, if the grand narrative of Islamism actually fails? Or is it going to be a new paradigm shift – again, as Dr. Ghabra mentions. That paradigm shift – we have the components of it, and Lebanon is part of that component - is exactly the realism of the youth, the culture of life as opposed to the culture of death that very often Islamism in its jihadist forms promotes. It might be indeed that the counter-paradigm to Islamism is being promoted today.

Lebanon therefore is indeed extremely important in that respect. But Lebanon is, as indicated by both Lokman and Najat, a very complex place, often portrayed in the form of a confederation of religions or confederation of communities. But even this approach to it, looking at it that way, is in itself problematic. Is it really 17 or 18 communities, as is said? Effectively, it is not. Maybe what we need to begin with in regard to Lebanon and also with regard to Iraq and with regard to the whole region is to move away from the communitarian approach and to try to assess how things are and how things can progress.

In particular, in the case of Lebanon, since this is the focus, maybe we should move away from a communitarian model to a societal model. Lebanon is not 17 or 18 communities, and I must point out to you that originally the 17th community included was the Jewish community. We have virtually no Jewish people left in Lebanon at all. We replaced the three Jewish communities by another three communities presumably. But effectively, the 17, the majority of them, are nothing but a few people here and there.

Actually it is far more productive to think of Lebanon in terms of societies, and the societies in question have to do with a pattern of life. We have in Lebanon basically urban societies, we have urbanized provincial societies, we have core provincial societies and we have periphery provincial societies. These are the four types.

Again, I'm not going to go into extreme detail about this, but, the Shi'a community - which is very complex in Lebanon - is not represented wholly by Hezbollah. Hezbollah represents actually the hegemony of some of these societies over others. Urban Shi'a in Lebanon are not exactly interested in the model that Hezbollah promotes. Actually even core provincial Shi'a in Lebanon are also not interested. What we have is an alliance between the southern suburbs of Beirut and the hinterlands of the south, where services are provided in a very bait and switch approach. We give you the services, vote for us; but then when you vote for us, we try to indoctrinate you.

But this process, this formula that Hezbollah is trying to apply, is not really a communitarian one. This is important to underline.

If Lebanon is to succeed it can serve as an alternative component of a model - I'm not saying as a model for the Middle East. But keep in mind, that there is Lebanese soft power when it comes to media in general, when it comes to popular culture across the Arab world, and this is why it's important. If it is to succeed, Lebanon has to deal with the time bombs and the minefields that are in it. The time bombs were almost left deliberately by the occupation. I'm referring here to the Syrian occupation. The Israeli occupation was not so clever to leave time bombs, perhaps to its advantage, or perhaps Israel has no interest in doing that. But the Syrian occupation was smart enough to leave them.

I'm referring here to three crucial time bombs. One of them is Hezbollah. Again, we should not think of Hezbollah as purely an implant in Lebanon for Syrian and Iranian influence. Actually, a far more productive way of looking at Hezbollah is as part of the restoration of the role of the clerical families, which were marginalized as a result of the feudal political families assuming their share in the political division in Lebanon and leaving the clerics aside. Now the clerics are coming back and coming back through the intricate games they play especially in the southern suburbs of Beirut and the south of Lebanon.

Hezbollah is a major time bomb. For Hezbollah to be defused - here, I disagree with Lokman - I don't think we need to go into trying to dictate to people what politics they can advocate and what they cannot. Hezbollah would like to advocate an Islamic republic: go ahead, do it. But let it be in the form of a level playing field. In other words, what I would like to see first and foremost from Hezbollah is Hezbollah defanged. The military arm of Hezbollah has to go, one way or another. When it was armed in order to resist Israel, it absolutely needed weapons. We recognize that, we appreciate that. It's over. 2000 is six years ago now. That occupation is over.

But far more important than the military going away, something else needs to go away: support from the outside, especially financial support from Iran. We cannot tolerate in the marketplace

of ideas to have a party that receives its funds secretly from a foreign power, especially if that foreign power is a totalitarian power intent on creating regional hegemony.

So the problem with Hezbollah is to complete the process of Lebanonization that Hezbollah has started. I remember back in the 1980s when Hezbollah would never raise a flag except its own or the Iranian flag. I remember Beirut was under semi-Iranian occupation when one of the landmarks of Beirut, the Rauche, the rock that's in the sea, had an Iranian flag flying on top of it. A change has happened, maybe cosmetic but important nonetheless. When Hezbollah was able to mobilize half a million people to demonstrate, there were nothing but Lebanese flags. If this Lebanonization process can continue, if Hezbollah can be defanged and moved away from having financial support from Iran, let it compete. I promise you, in the competition in Lebanon, Hassan Nasrallah cannot compete against Haifa Wahbi, a popular Lebanese pop singer. She will win if there's a level playing field.

However, this is only one time bomb. We have two other important time bombs in Lebanon, one of which is the Sunni Islamist radicalism. The Syrian occupation tolerated and nurtured this indirectly and allowed it to fester in the northern regions of Lebanon in particular, among periphery provincial communities. Again, here it's important, not just the reaction to the cartoons, to the blasphemous, insulting, uncivil, whatever you want to call them, cartoons against the Prophet. It was indeed Sunni radical Islamists who came from the north of Beirut and burnt churches, burnt businesses in Beirut. This is not reflective of a communitarian split, it's reflective of a societal issue, as I was mentioning. Sunni Islamist radicalism needs to be confronted head on in order to be dealt with.

The third time bomb, again left by the Syrian occupation, is the Palestinian camps. Here the Lebanese responsibility for the mistreatment of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in Lebanon cannot be avoided. Again, we have to face it head on. We have mistreated this population maybe to an equal degree as they have been mistreated elsewhere, such as Israel. If we're fighting Israel in Shebaa, though of course there is injustice in Israel, let's fight the injustice in the Palestinian camps in Lebanon and try to find a resolution there. That's a major issue that we have to deal with.

These are time bombs, by which I mean issues that can be dealt with and defused. We have minefields in Lebanon. Without going into extreme detail about them, I'll mention them. All of them are structural.

One of them is constitutional. We have, by our constitution in Lebanon, a weak state formula in which communities – through a combination – the president, the prime minister and the speaker of the house form a troika that has to decide everything. We have to deal with that, find a new constitutional formula that allows Lebanon to have a central existence without forming a weak state.

We have a social political issue too which has to do with the fact that mobilization in Lebanon still happens along communitarian lines. But reality on the ground is that we have horizontal integration that is countered by those attempts at vertical segmentation.

Finally, we have geopolitical issues. We have the very unlucky situation of being next door to Israel and Palestine and therefore having to be part of this problem, which actually may be – someone mentioned to me that we have the advantage of being there. Otherwise neither AEI nor the U.S. nor anyone else would be interested in us. I do not know if that's the case, but okay, here it is. We have that disadvantage and maybe advantage.

The frame of reference issue – part of the structural issue– has to do with how to identify ourselves. Najat mentioned to you the fact that most Lebanese do not think of themselves as Lebanese first. This is true, but it's interesting to note that this same poll found that there were variations as a function of age. Maybe we should rely on the next generation and work on having the next generation start developing that national feeling first.

In sum, what we have now is an opportunity. The opportunity is born of the fact that for the first time in a long time, Lebanon is almost free of occupation. Iranian intervention still qualifies as one form of occupation. The effect that many countries, whether it's Syria or Israel, try to play in Lebanon is meddling, not necessarily occupation. But nonetheless, we have an opportunity. Time will basically demonstrate whether we can grab it and by grabbing it whether we can help the wider Arab context move forward toward an alternative to Islamism.

Michael Rubin: Thank you very much, Hassan. What I'd like to do now is turn the floor over to questions for our panelists, and also for Professor Ghabra. Before you ask a question, I want to reiterate that we'd like you to ask questions, not make speeches. We'd also like you to state your name and your affiliation. I've never known anyone in Washington who doesn't have an affiliation. So we do ask you to state it for the record and for the transcript. Thank you very much. First question to Bilal Wahhab, an Iraqi Fulbright student.

Question: Thanks, Michael. My question to the panel in general is: in the absence of the voice of your Islamist counterparts that you pretty well demonized here, is there any room for mutual cooperation and dialogue, since you both have apparently a same objective in your totalitarian countries? Thank you.

Hassan Mneimneh: By dialogue you mean at the political level, at the intellectual, cultural level?

Question: Political, anti-government level.

Hassam Mneimneh: Well, in the case of Lebanon, the dialogue – because this is a country that operates on the basis of consensus as opposed to on the basis of opposition versus government in place, the dialogue continues by necessity. Unfortunately this is part of the formula that creates a weak state in Lebanon.

However, I have to mention here very quickly, the whole notion of when you have two partners, one with a vision – I'm talking about the Islamists – and the other with not so concrete a vision, a dialogue at the intellectual or cultural level – in other words, hybridity, bringing the Islamists into, if you like, the national debate on the identity of the state – might end up having – I mean,

you give them an advantage in that sense. Before the formulation of a liberal democratic alternative to Islamism, any hybridity, in my opinion, would be to the advantage of the Islamists.

Question: Thank you. My name is Karim Abdion[?], I'm the director of Ahwaz Human Rights Organization, an advocacy group for 5 to 6 million Arabs in southwestern Iran, Ahwazi Arabs. What is your take? Why don't you expose Hezbollah's repression of fellow Arabs in Iran? Thank you.

Lokman Slim: In fact what I said, of course Hezbollah is an Iranian proxy, is a terrorist organization, has a militia. But I mean, what I wanted to stress is the fact that neither disarming Hezbollah nor disbanding its militia is enough. Of course I don't dispose of information about direct participation in Iran, but I think that everybody knows that some traces about Hezbollah action in Iraq are already proved. We can deduce that the same is taking place in Iran.

Michael Rubin: Thank you very much. I want to reiterate that our questions for the panelists, for their participation, were to look at impediments to dissent and reform within their own countries. There are several valid questions out there about the region, but we're focusing on dissent and reform within Lebanon and Syria on this panel.

Michael Rubin: Please state your name and affiliation.

Question: [indiscernible], Arab African Center to Protect Journalists. My question is to the Lebanese speakers. You seem all of you to agree on refusing foreign interference in your country. You mentioned Hezbollah as being funded by Iran and especially you seem to be very allergic to Syria. I do understand that. But what would you think about the foreign interference in your country coming from France and the U.S., or are there some foreign countries that are less foreign than others?

Michael Rubin: Thank you, very good question. We'll take one or two more and then open the floor to the panelists.

Question: My name is Amal [indiscernible], I'm advisor to Mrs. [indiscernible] Hariri. My question is about one of the results of dialogue in Lebanon. One of the issues that there's a consensus on in the dialogue was the fact that Lebanon has not had diplomatic relations with Syria and indeed there has been no demarcation of borders between Lebanon and Syria. The Lebanese now are planning to send our prime minister to Syria to ask for these two things. I just want to ask our Syrian friend here if he thinks that Syria will accept these two issues, to demarcate the borders and to have diplomatic relations, which we never had before.

Question: Thank you, Michael. First of all, I would like to thank the American Enterprise Institute for inviting us. I am Dr. Latiri[?], I am with WHO. I'm pleased to be here. I was in Lebanon as the country representative from 2000 to 2005 and I worked with Future and others. My question to the panel: recently, Nasrallah signed a pact with Aoun. Could you make some comments on that please?

Question: [inaudible] Robinson, Hudson Institute. My question is for Dr. Ghabra. You spoke about the reforms going on in the mass media in the Arab world. I just want to know if you could elaborate on how it shapes public opinion in the region. Thank you.

Michael Rubin: So we had many questions about foreign influence in Lebanon beyond Syria and Israel. We had questions about lack of Syrian diplomatic recognition of Lebanon. There are many different questions from which you can choose your answers, but the last question was for Dr. Ghabra and I'll ask him to respond first.

Shafeeq Ghabra: If you look at the Arab world in the 1980s up to the early 1990s, there was a monopoly of the media. Sources of information were from the BBC. We learned of the 1967 defeat from the BBC. Ammar[?], you were in a variety of Arab media, and one used to hear your voice many times years ago. It's an expansion that started in the 1990s after the war of 1990-91 that related to the liberation of Kuwait. It started with Jazeera and then a few others. It was a debate that opened up a lot of issues that were taboo. Maybe it started in a way that was extremely sensual, maybe Fox News style. But at the same time, it expanded the horizon.

Now other media channels are coming with more centrist, balanced opinion. So the debate goes on. That media is becoming more engaging, more interactive, bringing in new issues is on the rise. So media is playing quite a role in that and I see much more of it.

The Internet is another form of media where people are also getting more involved in the interaction of messages across the region. The Islamists are using the media and the Internet very well, but so are the others. So is the opposition. Therefore it's an open medium for communication. Probably a new Middle East will have to be a communicative Middle East and it will have to be a kind of participatory Middle East. It's going to be part of the new type of system.

Now, there were some questions on dialogue between Islamists and liberals. I believe in dialogue. I think we should have dialogue. Maybe it will depend in many ways on how we frame the stories, how we frame the issues, how we frame the conversations. Ultimately the Islamists will not be able to have a single-handed victory over the Arab world. The Algerian case, the Sudanese case, the Afghani case – they will be there. They have an impact. Islamists can form government and lose government. They can win elections and lose elections. Therefore there has to be a realization: there will be voices. Some Islamists are coming to a conclusion - it's a small minority - that it is time to stop thinking about power, power, power, and maybe it is time to think about that their role is to preach. Maybe that will be a change. Preach, fine: I can accept, I can refuse.

So it's going to take a maturation process where they realize they cannot have monopoly, where everybody comes to the realization that there has to be some sort of a transition in power. One day you win, one day you lose. Therefore that's where democracy, that's where these possibilities come and have an impact. So that dialogue therefore is important. Framing the issues properly becomes important. New forces have to be empowered.

I think there is quite a solid base for liberal logic in the Arab world. The middle classes, the entrepreneurial classes, the journalists, the media, the thinkers, the writers – among many of them, there is a liberal base for thinking in terms of a potential democratic liberalism. Therefore that balance could be established.

Michael Rubin: Thank you. Ammar, would you like to comment on the question about Syrian diplomatic recognition of Lebanon?

Ammar Abdulhamid: Sure. The opposition for a long time - whether as groups or as individual dissidents - has always been advocating Syrian hands-off basically of Lebanon. I think the idea of diplomatic recognition of Lebanon is something that was not radical for us. It's something that's normal and natural. Most opposition figures that I know support the idea of exchange of embassies and ambassadors and recognizing that we are two different countries, no matter how close the ties between us. So I don't think this is a controversial issue for the opposition. If there's an opposition government right now in charge in Syria, you will find out that the diplomatic recognition will be forthcoming within a few short months.

Michael Rubin: Do you think there will be recognition of Lebanon under the regime of Bashar al-Assad?

Ammar Abdulhamid: By the government, I doubt it. I think there is a continuing attitude of looking down upon the Lebanese politicians and of supporting Lahoud. I don't think Bashar is going to be able to change his mentality. It's not only him but the entire group around him. So I don't really see that this is going to be something forthcoming anytime soon under the current regime.

Very quickly, we talked about dialogue with the Islamists. Indeed, the Syrian opposition, the secular and the Islamist forces have been in contact for a year now. The Damascus Declaration was really the product of an agreement between the Islamists and the secularists and reflects a consensus on the necessity of change and democratization in the country. The National Salvation Front that was formed in Brussels a couple weeks ago is also headed by a secular figure, who is Khaddam, and a religious figure, who is the head of the Muslim Brotherhood, Ali Sadreddine Bayanouni; it also has liberal elements and communists, etc.

So there is a dialogue going and it is taking a political form. This is the way to go, whether we like it or not. It's a begrudging agreement but it's also a realization on everybody's part that we cannot exclude the other. I think this in itself is good.

As far as foreign intervention is concerned, I think it's very clear for us that if foreign intervention comes to aid reform in the country, then it is acceptable. If it's going to come to aid the powers of the status quo and corruption and disruption, then it is not acceptable.

Michael Rubin: If Lokman and Najat would like to comment on any questions – again, with regard to dialogue with Islamists or about how Lebanese perceive the involvement, interference, however you want to look at it, of the United States and France. Najat, I believe, may, if you like, answer the questions in Arabic; but you have your headsets.

Lokman Slim: I will start with the question of interference. I cannot compare the Syrian and Iranian despotic regimes to the government of the United States or France. So I think the question is in itself does not stand. It's first.

Second, concerning the question about the alliance between General Aoun and Hezbollah, I think that this alliance is part of the strategy of Hezbollah to gain time. In fact, Hassan was evoking the question of Lebanonization of Hezbollah. This is part of this strategy of so-called Lebanonization. For Hezbollah, Lebanonization means empowering itself. It does not mean at all getting more moderate or changing its programme. Until now, Hezbollah follows Iran – not only in policy, but also in its allegiance to Ali Khamenei and not to the Lebanese constitution nor to Lebanon.

The third point concerns dialogue with Islamists. Really, I don't see the emergency of such dialogue as far as liberals in the Arab world are so weak. The Islamists never started a dialogue when they were emerging and perhaps we should follow their example. It was much more profitable for them to work aside from the society and to build up their counter-society rather than offering the possibilities of dialogue. Thank you.

Najat Sharafeddine: [in Arabic]

Michael Rubin: Thank you, Najat. Hassan.

Hassan Mneimneh: Just a quick footnote. There is no equivalence between the type of influence and the type of penetration that the Syrian regime had in Lebanon and the soft influence, however powerful it is, that governments such as France or the U.S. might have. Keep in mind, we're not talking here even about having allies on the Lebanese scene. We're talking about a penetration that threatens by force, that does act by force, and that kills, that subverts institutions, that tries to take away any ability for the local Lebanese political class, however corrupt it is, however problematic it is, to be able to move forward.

The fact that independence has to be viewed in the context of interdependence is not something that anyone can contest. We live in a regional, globalized environment. Therefore there will always be convergence of interests. But in the case of Syria - which some might argue this is exactly how it started with Syria in the 1970s – by the 1990s, this was not the case. Syria's occupation of Lebanon – and I use the term occupation deliberately – was subversive, corrosive, and aimed at keeping Lebanon divided in order for Syria to be able to rule.

So no apology here: U.S. influence, U.S. interest in Lebanon is more than welcome. It's solicited. French interest in Lebanon is more than welcome, it's solicited. Other types of interest – Saudi, other Arab, Egyptian – is also solicited in order to balance this absolutely devastating heavyweight that is our next-door neighbor and that is a despotic regime that, as you hear from Ammar, that has actually committed horrors inside Syria, horrors inside Lebanon. The fact that it happens to be Arab is no excuse. We would criticize it whether it's Arab, Turk, Zimbabwean or whatever.

This is the same with regard to Hezbollah. The fact that Hezbollah is helping Iranians oppress Arabs is of no significance to us. If it's helping a despotic regime oppress whoever, that is what is significant to us. The Arabity question is a cultural one, not a human rights one by necessity.

On the matter of the Lebanonization of Hezbollah, I disagree with Lokman. I think Hezbollah is not almighty. It is not all-capable of setting a strategy and moving ahead with it without it being affected. The base of Hezbollah is not as radical as the leadership of Hezbollah. The leadership has to account for the base. Hezbollah might be bluffing itself if it thinks that an alliance with Aoun will end up having it gain time and anchoring itself.

An alliance with Aoun will further erode its radicalization project and hopefully lead to a point where the other Lebanese can stand and say, Be whoever you want to be but don't get money from Ali Khamenei. You want to love Ali Khamenei, go ahead. But don't get money from Ali Khamenei and put your weapons to the side. If these two conditions are met, we'll fight it in the battlefield of ideas, not in the battlefield where guns and money are against us.

Michael Rubin: Thank you. We're going to seat our next panel immediately. So if Jamil and Sama can come up, as well as Hafez.

Panel 2: Challenges to Reform in Iraq and Jordan

Michael Rubin: I'm going to start immediately with the introductions of our next panel. It's very good today that we have people coming – we're very pleased today to have Ms. Sama Hadad from the Iraq Prospect Organization as well as Jamil Nimri, who is one of the primary columnists for Al Ghad newspaper in Jordan. Following their remarks, we're going to have an update from Yemen.

I'd like to turn the floor over to Ms. Sama Hadad. I do want to say that when I attended the first movements of the Iraq opposition, the conference in London and so forth, what was striking not just to me but to many others was a discussion of how diverse the group was. You had Shi'a, you had Sunni, you had Kurds, you had Turkmen, you had Chaldeans, you had Assyrians - any number of different ethnic or sectarian groups. But what wasn't talked about in the room is that you hardly had anyone under 40 years old. So the question came, how could you really have diversity in a place like Iraq if you're not going to count the voices of the youth? This was a theme that came out in the last panel.

I'm glad to say that the Iraq Prospect Organization is extremely active in empowering the voices of youth in democracy in Iraq. I'm also pleased to say that Sama Hadad is a fellow at the newly established Baghdad Institute for Public Policy Research, which shows just how much civil society is starting to develop. Her paper today will address questions of religious underpinnings, which will enable and validate democracy. She'll explain more about that.

Following her talk will be Jamil Nimri, who has written a great deal about the current efforts to reform in Jordan as well as steps yet to come, which need to come.

With that, I'm going to turn the floor over to Sama.

Sama Hadad: Thank you, Michael. Good morning, everyone. As Michael noted, I'm going to be focusing on the issue of Islam in Iraq. The reality of the country is that demographically the majority of the country is not only Shi'a but consider themselves to be Islamists. I believe that the road to a genuine, long-lasting democracy must be through this group rather than despite it. In search of a solution, I delved into the history and development of Shi'i political theory to find an answer.

I believe that in Iraq there is a real way of achieving a liberal genuine democracy that is lasting. That is because of a theory that was championed in the 1970s by someone called Muhammad Bakr al-Sadr, who is considered to be the founder of the current modern-day Shi'i Islamist movement. His theory is called vilayet-i-umma (wilayet al-umma), or in English, rule of the people. It sees essentially – I'm not going to bore you with the vast details, and let me tell you it is very heavily embedded in Qur'anic proofs – but essentially it sees the people's choice as central and vital to establishing an Islamic country. It is greatly, vastly different to the theory of vilayet-i-faqih, of Khomeini, which essentially is an authoritarian one, whereas vilayet-i-umma (wilayet al-umma) or rule of the people is synonymous with liberty and democracy.

Now that the Shi'a are in leadership and they have been proven in two elections to be the majority of the country, this theory must be revived within this group. Unfortunately, most Shi'a Islamists don't know the details of this theory. Because of the day-to-day obvious struggles of forming an Iraqi government and so forth, not many of them see the necessity of delving deep into their conscience and deciding as to the vision of Iraq that they see in the future.

However, the few that have thought about it and are advocates of this theory have essentially begun what I consider to be a seismic social change in Iraq. Before the war, Shi'a Islamists were debating among themselves whether Islam can ever be compatible with democracy.

Well, let me tell you, the discussions now are how they could have ever lived without democracy. In fact, they're coming to the realization that secularism is essential to establishing this theory of the rule of the people. To my great surprise, one of these people who do champion this theory wrote last week that secularism is vital to establishing this theory in Iraq and that as a consequence he coined that clerics should not be allowed in elections for the first twelve years of Iraq's history, to ensure an even playing field politically.

I'm not going to take much more of your time, but basically if this group of people is not supported, then the radicals within this group will increase in influence. They will be pushed toward Iran or equally dangerously they will rise up, if they're not listened to. I believe, in conclusion, there needs to be continued support for the Shi'a majority so that the moderates within them that do hold this theory near and dear to their hearts are empowered. A debate must be encouraged to take place among the Shi'a as to their vision for Iraq so that this theory of vilayet-i-umma (wilayet al-umma) or rule of the people – essentially a liberal democracy – can be revived once more. Thank you.

Michael Rubin: I want to thank Sama. Before I go on to Jamil, I did want to say that I have read Sama's paper with particular interest because it overlapped with some areas of my academic interest in my previous studies. Sama's paper and Jamil's paper are outside in a separate packet which you can pick up. There will also be a very hot buffet lunch at the conclusion of our talk.

But what really struck me about Sama's paper – my academic training is in history – I found very interesting and it correlates to many of my observations I had when I've been in Iraq, was how after the assassination of Muhammad Bakr al-Sadr in 1980, and after Saddam's accession to power, many prominent Shi'a thinkers, especially from the Islamic Dawa Party, had fled, some to London, but many to Iran.

Iran was the bastion of this idea of guardianship of the juris, the vilayet-i-faqih, and while there's real philosophical, theological underpinnings for this idea of rule of the people, because so many Islamic Dawa members were in Iran and weren't able to freely express themselves, the ideas weren't as fully fleshed out. The people in London, while they continued the thought process, had to keep in mind the safety of the individuals who had been in Tehran. So what we've seen in Iraq, and this is highlighted, I'm basically plagiarizing from Sama's paper right now, which is outside, but what you really see is a rapid catching up, acceleration to forward this philosophy which had started and which is now again very openly discussed, so that this concept of vilayet-i-faqih doesn't get imposed.

If you ask Iraqis, they have no love for Iran, and if you ask many Shi'a, they have no love for Iran's system of government. While many people in the United States and in Europe like to treat Iraq as a template upon which to grind our own political axes, and while we sometimes say the Sunnis say this, the Shi'a say that, as if the Sunnis and the Shi'a in Iraq have ever spoken with a single voice within their communities, anyone who's been to Iraq knows that's certainly not the case.

The fact of the matter is I do want to say that Sama has gone into this in considerable detail and for that matter, when it comes to Jordanian reform, Jamil has gone into considerable detail. We didn't want them to come up and read ten-page papers, because we wanted to leave a lot of time for questions and answers, but again, what I'm going to do now is turn the floor over. We'll have time for questions and answers, and you can also talk to the panelists over the hot lunch that will be waiting for you when we're done. With that, I turn the floor over to Jamil, who will be speaking in Arabic.

Jamil Nimri: [in Arabic]

Michael Rubin: Thank you very much. Before we go on to Hafez's talk, what I want to do is turn the floor over to questions specifically to Sama and to Jamil about Iraq and Jordan. Again, you can ask as many questions as you want, but I'm only going to give the first to the panel. Again, state your name, your affiliation, and please keep your question brief and to the point so we can have as much dialogue as possible.

Question: Boris [indiscernible], Democracy International. In regard to the Abdul Rashid case in Afghanistan, it was astounding how little support he got and how little steady commentary there

was among dissidents and democratic reformers in the Greater Middle East. The question is why, what would be the response to such a conversion case in your countries?

Michael Rubin: Sama and Jamil, if you want to address how that question, with regard to the convert in Afghanistan, would play specifically in Jordan and Iraq.

Jamil Nimri: [in Arabic]

Sama Hadad: Your question is quite important in highlighting the major underpinning of the theory of vilayet-i-umma, or rule of the people, in that Muhammad Bakr al-Sadr, when he wrote about it, he basically said that if the people, given the choice, do not choose Islam, then so be it: because it's the people's choice. That is why it's important for us to root for this theory to take hold in Iraq.

Question: Salama [indiscernible], Al-Hayat newspaper. This is a question for both panelists. We often hear that the U.S. call for democracy in the region is a liability on reformers, that the U.S. support for reformers is a kiss of death. I would like to hear your perspective because you two seem to have defied this argument. What do you think?

Jamil Nimri: [in Arabic]

Sama Hadad: Thank you for your question. In order to answer that, I basically go back to two points I made when I spoke. The reason why the seismic changes I spoke about are taking place on the ground in Iraq socially and politically has been because thus far the U.S. has been shown to be committed to democracy. As a consequence, it has empowered those moderates within the Shi'a Islamists. Now, if the case changes and policy changes, then I fear what I highlighted in my talk as well, which is less support for democracy equals more empowerment of the radicals within the Shi's Islamists and therefore a push of them towards Iran. That is dangerous.

Therefore the answer to your question is no, the calls for democracy and reform and commitment to democracy by the U.S. is in fact vital for these seismic changes to take place.

Question: Scott Field, UC-Berkeley. I have a question for Sama. I think it's very exciting what you say about the reemergence of democratic dialogue among the Shi'a in Iraq. I was just interested in the idea you floated of banning religious figures from holding political office for twelve years. As I understand, that line of democratic thinking is part of the quietist Shi'a tradition where religious figures don't necessarily seek to hold political office. I'm just wondering if that ban is really necessary and if it might not backfire in the long run.

Sama Hadad: Thank you for your question. In pointing that example out, I wasn't advocating or pushing for it. I'm not for it or against it. In fact, this is coming from a gentleman who does not in fact believe in the quietist theory, who does believe, who does come from the section of the Shi'a who believe in religious figures taking part in political life. So what I'm saying is that if this is coming from someone from that sort of background, because he has taken the time to look back and revive this theory of rule of the people, he's been able to come to such decisions, however personal they are to him.

Question: I'm Nawaz [indiscernible] with the [indiscernible] Group. My question is to the Jordanian speaker. In your paper that we are about to read, you mentioned reforms and you talked about honor killing in Jordan. My understanding is that Article 340 in the Jordanian law is still there and did not change. What is your comment on this?

Jamil Nimri: [in Arabic]

Question: I'm just a little perplexed. Is honor killing in Jordan still a felony or not? It's a felony? It is?

Jamil Nimri: Yes.

Question: My name is Muhammad [indiscernible] from the Kenyan Embassy. My question is directed to Sama. There's ample evidence that suggests that if free and fair elections are held in many Arab countries, including Egypt and Algeria, the Islamists are likely to win with huge majorities. My question is this: How do you reconcile the differences between the rhetoric that keeps coming from Western capitals and within the Islamic intellectual circles that tend to overplay the role of the liberal, moderate Arab political parties, and the fact on the ground that the Islamists enjoy huge popularity within the Arab masses.

Question: It's almost the same question: I'm talking about the Islamist groups, as opposed to liberal and moderate groups. Most of the speakers, to be fair, not all of them, seem to be afraid and very concerned about this rise of Islamist groups. Let's face it: if we have free elections in different Arab and Muslim countries, they will win. To what extent are countries like the U.S. willing to accept governments like Hamas and to go forward to democracy?

Question: I'm sorry, but it's almost on the same trend. If we define democracy by Western standards, it's the government of the people by the people. It seems like in some countries, namely Algeria and Iraq and Palestine, they have tried to apply this rule but it seems like they have backlashed, to the extent that it seems some other Arab leaders, like Egypt's, will postpone some democratic movement. So if we're going to apply this kind of democracy, are we going to see another kind of backlash on the rest of the Arab and Middle East countries?

Question: Rasha Amir, University of Maryland. My question is that the Arab world, as all the questions came out, is dominated by Islamists because they look from the Arab world like heroic people fighting against corruption, against all the evil in this part of the world. So what would be the heroic position of the people who would be the counterpart of the Islamists? How can you be heroic and impose democracy in a democratic way?

Jamil Nimri: [in Arabic]

Sama Hadad: I'm going to couple the first two questions together because they seem to be one and the same. Fortunately, or unfortunately, my area of expertise is Iraq. I am a strong believer that you cannot find a one-size-fits-all solution to all the Arab countries. I've just personally highlighted the complexity of the situation of the Islamists in Iraq. I just think you've got to look

at different countries and see how you can delve deep into empowering the moderates within the Islamists.

I don't quite understand how – something about bringing free and fair elections to Iraq – is backlashing. I don't quite understand what you mean by backlashing because I don't really understand how it has backlashed.

Michael Rubin: Just for the record, the response was about the inability to form a government about four months after elections.

Sama Hadad: Right. We all know the government hasn't been formed yet but that's not to say that there's been a backlash. That's not to say you shouldn't have free and fair elections because you cannot form a government fast enough. Iraq is very complicated. There are many different groups and many different perspectives to take into consideration. To couple that with the reality of the election results is complex and we must be patient. Germany did not become a full-fledged democracy overnight. We shouldn't be so short-sighted and lose patience.

As to the question up front from the lady, I think your question was how do we empower the other side that's not the Islamist side. I don't know and I don't believe in doing things the long way around or whatever. I believe in taking the reality of a country and dealing with it pragmatically. The reality of Iraq is that it is majority Shi'a Islamists and therefore we must find a solution that comes from within these people and not a long-winded, twisted way of doing things. That is the only way you will get a long-lasting democracy that will be there decades and centuries after the troops leave.

Michael Rubin: While I'm tempted to answer some of those questions which were about U.S. policy, the purpose of the dissent and reform panel was to highlight the views of our people coming from abroad. But I do want to point out that this is the second in a series of three panels, and after the first panel in January, Saad Eddin Ibrahim had given an address – he's one of the advisors for this program – in which he talked about how there's a dichotomy between autocracies and theocracies, and how oftentimes people get caught in this dichotomy and therefore don't do anything to support the liberals in between who are getting attacked both by the theocrats and by the autocrats.

I'm not here to speak for Saad Eddin Ibrahim but what I will say is that on the webpage of the Dissent and Reform Panels, which is on the AEI webpage, you can find both the transcript and the video, and I'd highly recommend not only looking at some of the discussions that happened here today but also some of the discussions which happened last January.

At the beginning of this session, we talked a little bit about an update from some of our participants who couldn't be here. But I also want to give an update from some of the participants who are here. With that, I want to introduce Hafez al-Bukari. I'm so strict on the panel sometimes; during the last session in January, I kept saying, keep it short, keep it short. Americans don't have a long attention span. Hafez ended his talk in two minutes. But we're going to give him more time this time.

I also do want to recognize that after Hafez spoke, and Hafez is now with the Yemen Polling Center – after he advocated against government interference in the press, he was fired from his job. The people who are coming here today are quite bold and many of them have suffered consequences, and not only Hafez has suffered consequences, but his wife who is also here today, has also suffered harassment for her work. She's the head of the Yemen Female Media Forum and we're thrilled that she can also join us today, to make sure that Hafez gets here on time and everything else.

With that, I do want one more word about Hafez before I continue. Hafez came here in January but last August and September he also joined us on a panel that had been organized by one of our former colleagues, Radek Sikorski, who is now defense minister of Poland, to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Solidarity movement in Poland. We had the conference in Gdansk, Poland, and after Hafez spoke about some of the challenges to dissent and reform, I remember Lech Walesa came up and said, "Who was that?" It really made an impression. With that, I want to turn over the floor to Hafez to speak for about five or six minutes about an update on the situation in Yemen.

Hafez al-Bukari: Thank you. I would like to talk about how the Yemeni authorities deal with reforms and the democracy issue. Democracy is a condition for our unity and for our new role, which came out after the unification of Yemen in 1990. Yemen is completely different. So when we talk about good governance, Yemeni authorities say that yes, we can create good governance, which means press freedom, so you can establish private newspapers. The government has started to establish these private newspapers.

So these private newspapers start to slander, abuse the critical journalists or the cultural journalists and activists. When you talk about good governance that means you should allow people to establish NGOs. So the government usually starts to establish these NGOs and give the followers to establish these NGOs which we call them GONGOs – Government Operated Non-Governmental Organizations. So these NGOs usually talk about the surface of political issues and don't reach the serious issues like the presidential authorities. In Yemen, the president monopolizes the three branches of government. He can fire judges, he can nominate the leaders of the parliament and he can fire absolutely any government leaders, the whole cabinet.

This is the problem in Yemen: We don't have an independent elections committee; this is currently appointed by the president. I want you to envision that we have a presidential election on next September 22. How can you imagine anyone who can compete with a President who was ruled for thirty years?

There is another problem in that we are an illiterate society and we want to reach people for voting in the elections. How can you reach people in the election if you don't have TV stations, you don't have the radio channels because these media are monopolized by the government and the authorities?

The other major problem is corruption. All of the people talk about corruption, even the president and the prime minister and the speaker of the parliament. But most of these people

who talk about corruption, who are supposed to be employed by the public or the nation, most of them have palaces in the cities I think Bill Gates doesn't have. They usually talk about corruption and fighting corruption and they say we should fight corruption through true ways and smooth ways. We could not find these ways until now.

So all Yemenis recognize and realize that there should be reforms and democracy, but dealing with this issue is different from different perspectives. I think Yemeni journalists are in the forefront in the fight for this change. So they're usually under attack – whether they are kidnapped or slandered; so they are under the pressure more than the politicians because we still don't have very big opposition parties which can fight against these procedures or these attacks.

We have another problem in Yemen, when we talk about the interference of foreign communities or international communities. In Yemen we receive aid and support for the military, for security, for intelligence, for everything. But when we talk about the support to press freedom, usually the government decries this as interference in our issue. But intelligence support, military support and security support the government does not consider interference. So when we talk about that, the government says we are agents for foreigners.

I think just two days ago, while I am here, the main papers of the ruling party published articles about my visit. They say that I am going to meet Danish officials – they use the Danish cartoons against the people who don't support them. They say that I have meetings with the Danish officials and with Mossad officers because they want to incite society against you. Many times society doesn't like this and sometimes they say, don't [indiscernible] in the press and after that talk about the agents for the foreigners.

Another issue is that of fighting terror.. They can say that you want to promote democracy or fight the terror in our region. Does the United States want to fight terror or promote democracy? I think many of you heard about the escape of 16 accused of terror in Yemen. Many people talk about the blackmail of this issue against the demands of promoting democracy.

I think in conclusion that we have patience in Yemen to reach our goals. We will continue and we are very optimistic for our future. We want you as supporters, as counterparts, as our friends to have the same patience which we have, and thank you.

Michael Rubin: Thank you, Hafez. I just want to clarify that the papers regarding Yemen which were delivered at the last presentation in January, they're linked to the website so you can see more. When Hafez talked about GONGOs, that means government-operated nongovernmental organizations, which is one of the greater problems now, is people talk the talk of democracy but decide they want to license independent civil society and so forth.

Before I welcome Nejjib to the podium, there are a couple thank yous I need to say, not only to all of those who have been here today, as well as all those behind the scenes who have helped and worked to get them visas. But I also very much need to thank Rachel Hoff, Rebecca Miller, Molly McKew, and last but not least my assistant, Suzanne Gershowitz, who really made this happen today, especially as I was absent for the two weeks before the panel got started. As you saw, Danielle Pletka isn't feeling so well today. This could not have happened without them and

this panel is not just this panel. We've actually been doing this program for a week, introducing people around to journalists, to officials, and so forth. An incredible amount of work occurs to make this happen, and for that we need to thank Suzanne, Rachel, Rebecca and Molly.

Lastly, after Nejjib finishes, there will be a hot buffet lunch where you can join our honored guests and discuss things more leisurely over lunch.

Lastly, before I introduce Nejjib, I did want to say and reiterate again how concerned we are with the situation with Neila Charchour Hachicha, but it's not only AEI that's concerned. We've been up to all hours the last couple of days talking to the White House, talking to the State Department. The State Department has been extremely helpful in this matter. A lot of people are really rallying because it's such a flagrant case of punishing someone for freedom of expression, especially when, if you read the transcript from the last discussion, Neila was the lady who was saying no, the U.S. is in too much of a rush to have elections, we need to build civil society more first before there are elections. Neila has spoken for herself in the Daily Star op-ed which was on your chairs as you entered.

Now I get to Nejjib Chebbi, who is the head of the Progressive Democratic Party in Tunisia and is also a Tunisian lawyer. I first met him about two years ago, but I hardly recognized him when he came because coinciding with the World Summit on Information by the United Nations, Nejjib with several other activists went on a hunger strike, and it shows – a 32-day hunger strike. I've been reading translations of the Tunisian press over the last couple days. They've called Nejjib a Ba'athist, they've called him a Zionist, they've called him an Islamist. He's the first Islamist Ba'athist Zionist I've ever met. But most importantly, he is a liberal democratic activist and it's a pleasure to have him here today.

Nejjib Chebbi: Thank you very much, Michael. I will try in these final remarks to react not only to the papers which have been presented today, but also to the question, the crucial questions, I had in very useful meetings we had this week. Many of our partners were wondering if reform is necessary in the Arab world, if it is useful, if it is not dangerous for stability, for peace, and even for freedom itself. I think some remarks must be made about these questions.

Let me say in the beginning that reform is not an American creation. It is a very ancient, very old demand in the Arab world. It started in the second half of the 19th century. All the political thought in this time spoke about reforming the political system and education, and since the beginning of the 20th century the question of freeing women has been raised in Egypt by Samir Amin and in Tunisia in 1930 by Taha Hadad.

I want to say that reforms started in Tunisia in 1875. I will not be very long, because every Arab can speak about the history of liberalism and the tradition of liberalism in the Arab world, in each country – in Tunisia, in Egypt, in Morocco and elsewhere. In Tunisia, reform of education started in 1875. We had the first constitution in 1861. We had press end of the 19th century. We had the first political party in 1919. We choose the party who is ruling Tunisia today and which name is the Constitutional Party – this means what was important was the constitutionality for the elite at that time.

I will not be very long, I can speak really for hours about our liberal traditions. What happened in Tunisia and many other countries, that independence, although it meant social and economic progress, it meant on the political level the end of pluralism, the end of freedom, and the beginning of personal power and a system with unitary party.

I apologize for my English, it's the first time I speak in English.

Then since that, people have been dispossessed from their liberties and many of us have been jailed since the 1950s. Then when the United States spoke for the first time, as I know, in November 2003 of the mistakes she did for sixty years, not raising the question of reform in the Arab world until it had its effects for the national security inside the United States, we say in the Arab world that that is a good thing that the United States is now aware that one of the sources of anti-Americanism in the Arab world was the collusion between the United States and regimes. For the people, our regimes are sustained, supported, armored and protected by the United States. That was one of the sources of the anti-Americanism in the region. Then today we are happy that the international community poses the problem of reforming the Arab world.

The second remark I want to speak about here is that in the Arab world, even though there is a common problem, there are distinctive processes for democratization. What is common is that nowhere in the Arab world is there a democratic system, a democratic regime. What is a democratic regime for me? It is separation of powers, checks and balances, independent judiciary, free elections, basic human rights and freedom, and the rule of law – all that doesn't exist in any Arab country, as a system, as a political system.

What is common in the Arab world, that in this era of globalization and free markets at the level of the whole world, we can no longer progress on the economic and social level without political reforms. This is because the state is no longer the main investor, the main creator of jobs and so on. The private sector must be mobilized to compete with others on the international level. That cannot be done without a healthy climate for business. That means freedom of press, independent judiciary, accountability, and a check on the bureaucracy.

What is common for this region is that we will never meet our economic integration, which is now an international demand for foreign investors. The markets in the Arab world are too closed to appeal to investors. We have to integrate our markets, either in the Maghreb or on the level of the whole Arab world. Without democracy, we will never meet this objective and we will lack for a very long time.

These are some of the common problems we confront. But we cannot speak about democratization in the same way in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco and so on. In each country there are specific problems. But we can divide this world into two big parts.

The first one is the countries where there are no basic freedoms, like the country to which I belong, Tunisia, unfortunately for my country. In the country, Michael said to you, we were obliged a few months ago to go on a hunger strike for 32 days for claiming three basic freedoms: freedom of speech and press, freedom of association – that means the freedom to create parties and NGOs – and freeing the political prisoners.

Today there are some hundreds of political prisoners in jail in Tunisia but many thousands have been sentenced for a very long period. They finished their sentences but now they have no job, they cannot move inside the country, and they cannot speak about leaving it. They number in the thousands. The function of these prisoners is to make people afraid, to frighten those who want to express their ideas and apply themselves in the political field; they see that they can have the same destiny that all these political prisoners face.

Then, in this country, what is necessary today, are basic freedoms. These must come before a transition toward democracy, which means reforming the constitutions, reviewing the laws and running fair elections. These basic freedoms include: Freedom for the magistrate to elect their own committee, because in Tunisia the magistrate tried to elect a free committee and the power, but the regime banned it. This means the freedom for journalists to hold their national conference. Journalists cannot today in Tunisia hold their national conference. That means that the Tunisian League for Human Rights can hold its 6th national conference. Today this NGO cannot hold its conference because it is independent. Thus in this set of countries, the problem is to liberalize.

In other countries, such as Morocco or Egypt or Jordan or Lebanon, the problem is to democratize. It's to go forward, to transition toward democracy, which means that the population can participate in the decision process by representation. In these countries, there are many specific issues. They think if you want to help the process of democratization in the Arab world, we have to see this world country by country, because we cannot solve the problems speaking generally. This was the second remark.

The third remark I want to speak about is: what is the wait for democratization? If we want to be realistic, the process is going. I agree with Mr. Shafeeq, we are going ahead, but very, very slowly. We have to wonder how to run faster. Some think that because of the weakness of the elite in the Arab world, when we speak generally, this reform will come from inside the regimes themselves.

I think that idea is not very true. It is not working because for the emergence of reformers from inside the regimes, there is a condition. That condition is pressure on them which makes them feel that reform is a necessity. Today the weakness of the political process doesn't make the rulers feel that necessity and then they don't react positively to the claims for democratization in the country.

The second one is that if the process is self-initiated by the rulers themselves, we can have what is happening for example in Russia today. But more than that, what happened in Tunisia in the 1980s. In the 1980s, President Bourguiba had been deposed by the prime minister of that era, which is President Ben Ali today. We had reforms for two years, but two years later we returned to a personal power with total confiscation of our basic freedoms. That is a risk which must be taken into account when we speak about the possibility to have the process start from inside the regime.

The second is that that process must come from within the society. I think that this is true. Even it took time, even if it is hard to do there is no other way. Today elites are awakening. For

speaking about my country, Tunisia, the lawyers are independent. The magistrates tried to do, the journalists also, the trade unions, the NGOs, the political parties are awakening, claiming reform and trying to put pressure on the government to get their basic freedoms. But the population doesn't apply themselves in this process because of a half-century of repression, a half-century which, if you want to be safe for your freedom, safe for your job, you have to be neutral in the political field.

Then that's why this process can and must be helped by the international community. I think that supporting this process doesn't mean intervening in the political life of these countries by force or by political means. What is necessary today is to stand behind or beside the reformers, to support them, and to practice what is now starting in the United States, public diplomacy. When we feel that Hachicha, whose sole crime is to attend this conference in January, and she's harassed, she's threatened in her safety and the safety of her daughter, or her husband – when we know that the State Department issued a public statement about this case, we know that the American Enterprise Institute is mobilized about her case to get her help - this will encourage the reformers to continue their struggle.

The final question I want to raise is: Is the reform in the Arab world dangerous for the interests of the United States or of the West? That question raises the question of political Islam. I think there are many ways to deal with that question. The means of violence they have been experiencing and have experienced and failed. There are means to approach this question from an ideological point of view.

I think that way doesn't help to solve the problem. I think the better way is to be pragmatic, to see the facts. We are in the Muslim world. Islam is very influential in the life of each individual. That's a fact. We cannot speak about democracy in the Arab and Islamic world forgetting that fact. We cannot ignore that the mainstream today, and many of my colleagues, are for political Islam.

This is a point of view which cannot be shared but I think it's my duty to express it. If we look to this phenomenon, which is cultural and social and political phenomenon – it's not exogenous – we see that there is an evolution. That evolution is to accept democracy as a part of the political Islam thought. The revolutionary way failed everywhere – in Iran, in Sudan, in Afghanistan and in Algeria. Then the Islamists, put under the pressure of this experience and the evolution of the world and the Cold War, the new technology of information, the globalization at all levels – forced them to progress toward reviewing their points of view.

We have now an experience in Turkey where Islamists are ruling in a society which is not monopolized by Islamism. There is balance between the Islamists which are ruling and the society's secularist forces which are in opposition but in a legal framework. I think this experience in Turkey must be taken into account, because it can perhaps be reproduced elsewhere.

What is happening in Palestine has two sides. The first side is relative to relations with Israel. The United States asked Hamas to recognize Israel and to accept the political process. These are problems related to the regional conflict. They are not directly related to the democratic

process. From the point of view of democratic process, the experience of Hamas, which is ruling by the way of the polls and which has a very big secularist society in opposition to it, can be a new experience on the path of reform.

I will not be very long, but I want to attract your attention to the fact that Morocco will have elections in 2007. In Morocco, the trend is also in the favor of the Islamists. But in Morocco as elsewhere there are two kinds of Islamists: the moderates, which are evolving toward the acceptance of democracy, and the others which are still totalitarian.

Thus what I want to say is that the problem is to be pragmatic about this issue. There are no politics with zero risk. We have to take the risk and the solution is two-sided. First, the Islamists accept democracy and basic freedoms, and second, we don't have to rely on the declaration but to have a secularist bloc to constitute a balance in front of them.

I want to say that in Tunisia, after the hunger strike, we engaged in discussions with the Islamists to integrate them into the political process. The discussions are going on about basic questions. For example, we are talking about equality of sex. In Tunisia, polygamy has been banned for half a century. Tunisians do not accept to come back to that the situation prior to that. Do the Islamists accept the equality of sex?

Second, there is the question of the freedom of belief. We don't want to have the case the Afghans had this week. It's not possible. We ask the Islamists: Do you accept the banishment of the corporal punishment and so on? We are discussing basic freedoms and human rights because for us, democracy is not only a mechanism to solve conflict in a society, but a way to solve conflicts in a society based on human rights. That is modern democracy. Any alternative is populism and totalitarianism.

Those are some remarks I want to submit to your reflection. I thank you.

Michael Rubin: I want to thank everyone for coming here today. You've just witnessed a crime being committed: the expression of free speech which would not be possible, as Neila Charchour Hachicha has found out, in Tunisia. Our thoughts are with her and I can assure you that AEI is going to stop at nothing to pursue this until the harassment stops against her daughter, the harassment stops against her husband, and the harassment stops against her, for the sole crime of talking out about dissent and reform. That is one thing that is not acceptable, to take the actions that the Tunisian government has been taking.

I want to remind everyone that there's a hot lunch outside. The papers are available. We look forward to seeing you in September when we have our next group of people, which hopefully will also include Neila again.

[End of transcript]