

# Twentieth Anniversary Soref Symposium: Assessing the Winds of Change

by [Mohsen Sazegara \(/experts/mohsen-sazegara\)](#)

May 20, 2005

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### [Mohsen Sazegara \(/experts/mohsen-sazegara\)](#)

Mohsen Sazegara is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute where he will focus on the prospects for political change in Iran and the role of the international community in the movement for democracy in Iran.

In the late 1970s, as an undergraduate at Sharif University of Technology in Iran



## In-Depth Reports

On May 20, 2005, Rola Dashti, Hisham Kassem, Habib Malik, and Mohsen Sazegara addressed The Washington Institute's Soref Symposium. Rola Dashti is chair and chief officer of FARO International, a management consulting firm, a leader in the campaign for women's rights in Kuwait and an associate professor at Kuwait University. She has worked as a consultant to the World Bank in the areas of human resource development in Yemen, family planning in Tunisia, and population issues throughout the Middle East. Hisham Kassem is president of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, chief executive officer of the liberal daily al-Masri al-Yawm, and vice president for international relations of Hizb al-Ghad (Party of Tomorrow), led by member of parliament Ayman Nour. Habib Malik, a professor of history and cultural studies at Lebanese American University (Byblos campus), is chairman of the Charles Malik Foundation and author of *Between Damascus and Jerusalem: Lebanon and Middle East Peace* (The Washington Institute, 2000). Mohsen Sazegara is one of Iran's foremost democratic activists and a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

### Rola Dashti

On May 16, 2005, Kuwaiti women were given the right to vote and the right to run for political office. Previously, many had doubted the likelihood of such change, but Kuwaiti women were able to take the first step toward deepening democracy and reversing backwardness.

Those who fought for suffrage were accused of ruining the social fabric of Kuwait, of being anti-religious and anti-nationalist. They were called traitors, agents of the West, and advocates of divorce. Despite such criticism, the women's movement prevailed. When 1,300 women staged a peaceful march recently, it was indicative of their refusal to allow extremists to control their lives.

A key factor in this change is the media, which allows individuals to reach out and create a broad-based group of supporters. Support from outside powers also has a tremendous influence on efforts to change the Middle East. These powers -- including the United States -- should act as partners in reform, fulfilling their promises and supporting promising trends in the Arab world such as grassroots activity and civil society. Embracing liberal reformers would help foster economic openness, which would in turn contribute to a higher standard of living, foster

a more vibrant society, and deter citizens from supporting despotic regimes. Moreover, enhanced cultural exchange with the West would encourage reform and help Arab societies to further modernize.

Hisham Kassem

As recently as 2003, Egyptian politics seemed on the verge of dying. Previously, Egypt had been plagued by years of political turbulence. Incidents such as the 1952 coup (which involved the destruction of parliament) and the 1968 massacre of the judiciary destabilized the country and provided little room for reform efforts. One of the first individuals who attempted to reintroduce a multiparty system, President Anwar Sadat, was assassinated in 1981. Later, President Hosni Mubarak, a military man by training who began his career as a reformer, was unable to let go of his stern military beliefs and was therefore not successful at reform. By the late 1980s, the Egyptian government had stopped paying its debts and eventually went bankrupt. Although the 1991 Gulf War halved Egypt's debts, economic stagnation continued.

Throughout most of this political and economic turmoil, the government faced little domestic criticism. Murmurs of dissent began to be heard in 2003, however, and criticism intensified in 2004 when the judiciary refused to monitor elections if they were likely to be rigged. At the same time, Egyptian universities began to voice their frustrations after years of government interference in their affairs.

U.S. foreign policy helped catalyze these changes. After the September 11 attacks, regimes that the international community had once deemed stable were no longer given carte blanche to forcibly suppress internal opposition. By supporting civil society and reformers within Egypt, the United States provided a means of challenging the old order. The citizens of Egypt were tired of violence and felt as though they were being left behind by their neighbors with regard to democratization. Many individuals came to realize that democracy could fulfill their interests more effectively than the existing government.

Habib Malik

On March 14, 2005, one-third of the Lebanese population, or one million individuals, cut across the religious and security lines of two countries by marching peacefully for an end to Syrian domination. This Cedar Revolution came about due to several factors, including the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri; the twenty-nine-year duration of Syria's occupation; the manipulated election of a parliament that looked much like the previous, pro-Syrian legislature; several other provocative Syrian policy decisions; and international involvement led by the United States.

The climate of change within Lebanon also resulted from civil society activities and the effectiveness of popular pressure. Unlike many of its neighbors, Lebanon boasts a tangible track record of freedom and a strong, well-educated base of elites.

In the post-September 11 world, outside actors such as the United States no longer wholeheartedly support authoritarian regimes, in part because such support has yielded little benefit in the past. In order to protect the gains made in the wake of the Syrian pullout, the Lebanese believe that the United States must continue its involvement.

Even so, the old regime has lost a significant amount of power despite remaining largely intact after the withdrawal. The former approach of terrorizing opposition through the use of violence has proven ineffective in recent months.

Mohsen Sazegara

Throughout Muhammad Khatami's eight-year presidency, his reformist followers have been unsuccessful in their attempts to join the global community, advance democracy, and support human rights and civil society. Nevertheless, there are flickers of hope for progress in Iran.

The makeup of Iranian society has changed as a result of significant growth in a number of variables, including

literacy rates, urbanization, connectedness to global communications, women in the workforce, and, most important, the urban middle class. All of these factors have fostered more progressive thinking by young Iranians. The government itself has not been reformed; in fact, it has regressed significantly. Its ideals, which remain grounded in a particular vision of Islamic jurisprudence, do not match those of a transforming Iranian society.

In an effort to hearten the people, Iranian reformers often encourage outside powers to ignore the results of questionable Iranian elections, to support human rights efforts within Iran, and to back the international investigation of terrorist links within the government. International support is imperative to giving hope to Iranians, especially the younger generation.

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆  
Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆  
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

## [Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

### TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Gulf & Energy Policy \(/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy\)](#)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Egypt \(/policy-analysis/egypt\)](#)

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](#)

[Lebanon \(/policy-analysis/lebanon\)](#)

[North Africa \(/policy-analysis/north-africa\)](#)

[Gulf States \(/policy-analysis/gulf-states\)](#)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)