

Toward a New Middle East:

Women and Development

Feb 25, 2004



Brief Analysis

On February 12, 2004, Paula Dobriansky addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. As the undersecretary of state for global affairs, Dr. Dobriansky is the senior State Department official responsible for a broad range of transnational issues, including democracy, human rights, labor, counternarcotics, law enforcement, refugees, humanitarian relief, and environmental and scientific matters. The following are excerpts from her remarks. [Read a full transcript. \(templateC07.php?CID=155\)](#)

"The time is long overdue for democracy and development to come to the Middle East. And special attention must be paid to the plight of women. As Vice President Cheney noted last year, 'No society can prosper that denies opportunity and justice to half its citizens.' Fortunately, as President Bush said in London last November, 'Governments across the Middle East and North Africa are beginning to see the need for change.' Our pro-women policies are essential in this environment because they provide encouragement and support to existing currents of change and could lead to real progress. One sign of these currents is a small but growing chorus in the Middle East calling for democracy and liberalization. It is accompanied by a new introspection that has begun to associate the region's lackluster development with its lack of freedom.

"The best example of this can be found in the 2002 Arab Human Development Report, which was generated by a team of several dozen Arab scholars. This report recognized that 'human development is inextricably linked with human freedom.' It also acknowledged that the wave of democracy that swept Latin America, East Asia, and Eastern Europe in recent times has barely reached the Middle East, and asserted that 'this freedom deficit undermines human development and is one of the most painful manifestations of lagging political development.' The report also noted the unequal status of women and how this injustice impedes development. It stated that 'gender inequality is the most pervasive manifestation of inequality of all kinds in any society because it typically affects half the population,' and concluded that 'society as a whole suffers when a huge portion of its productive potential is stifled, resulting in lower family incomes and standards of living.' So critical is the empowerment of Arab women to the authors of the report that they list it as one of three central components of a strategy to rebuild their societies. The two other components are human rights and freedom, and the acquisition and consolidation of knowledge by Arab populations.

"We are beginning to see other welcome trends. The King of Morocco recently announced sweeping reform of the legal status of women. Speaking to his country's parliament, King Mohammed VI said, 'How can society achieve progress while women, who represent half the nation, see their rights violated and suffer as a result of injustice, violence, and marginalization, notwithstanding the dignity and justice granted to them by our glorious religion?' His reform overturns the legal definition of women as inferior to men and establishes equality under law. It restricts polygamy, allows women to initiate divorce, and frees women from the requirement to seek permission from their fathers or brothers to get married. Importantly, the reforms were done within the context of Islamic law. So opponents of the reform have no credibility in asserting that gender inequality is mandated by Islam. . . .

"Another promising development occurred in 2002, when the emir of Bahrain announced parliamentary elections as well as municipal elections that would permit women candidates to run for office. This move represented a significant step forward for women's rights, political and economic reform, and the emir's plan for achieving broader political participation in Bahrain. . . .

"Another encouraging development in the greater Middle East is the growing reform movement in Iran. Iran's young population increasingly yearns for freedom and is disillusioned with the role of conservative clerics, who control the police and security forces and ruthlessly resist their calls for full democracy. Despite brutal oppression, the movement presses on and demonstrates that people in the country and the region will not indefinitely tolerate an unequal, undemocratic status quo. One of the leading voices in Iran's democratic movement is that of Shirin Ebadi, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize last year. Ebadi is a longtime defender of women and children and was imprisoned in Tehran for standing up for prodemocracy dissidents. She has asserted that 'there is absolutely nothing incompatible or contradictory about Islam, democracy, and political freedom.' The sooner her message is accepted, the sooner the Middle East can reach its potential, which will benefit everyone in the region -- both men and women.

"Last but not least, . . . the elimination of Saddam Husayn's tyrannical regime has created the greatest opportunity in a generation to advance democracy, liberty, and equality in that part of the world. . . . [Coalition Provisional Authority administrator L. Paul Bremer] declared that 'to educate women, to permit them to take their place in society as teachers, as doctors, as lawyers and, yes, as police officers and presidents violates no religion, destroys no family.' It is important that messages like this are now reaching the ears of Middle Easterners with increasing frequency. . . .

"I had the privilege of visiting Iraq in July of 2003 and meeting with many women, including a new Women's Steering Committee representing Iraq's diverse society. There and elsewhere in the Middle East, American support has launched an array of creative and diverse development programs, including literacy courses for girls and women; life skills, computer, and vocational training programs; maternal and child healthcare clinics and education; micro-credit facilities and networking workshops for aspiring businesswomen; and exchange programs in civic leadership. . . .

"We are also seeking to leverage nongovernmental organizations to achieve our democracy and developmental objectives. . . . One of the leading public-private partnerships in this area is the National Endowment for Democracy, which recently celebrated its twentieth birthday. NED funds numerous nongovernmental groups with people on the ground creating and improving the machinery of democracy. In his State of the Union Address, President Bush announced his intention to ask Congress to double the Endowment's budget by appropriating an additional \$40 million specifically targeted for programs in the Middle East.

"Another major U.S. program in the region is the Middle East Partnership Initiative, or MEPI, a presidential initiative that has committed \$129 million to support reform in four areas, known as the economic, political, education, and women's pillars. . . . The MEPI women's pillar seeks to reduce cultural, legal, regulatory, economic, and political barriers to women's full participation in society. Programs include an International Visitors Program to promote women as political leaders by providing training in organizing political campaigns, a regional effort to develop a women's network and strengthen NGOs working on political and legal issues, a workshop on challenges facing women and the law, and a U.S. business internship program for young Arab women.

"A global effort that will assist the promotion of democracy in the Middle East over the longer term is the Community of Democracies. . . . The close involvement of democracies that have endured authoritarian rule -- such as Chile and Poland -- can make the Community an especially useful resource for countries in transition. Finally, we are taking active and confident steps toward engaging the people of the greater Middle East through exchanges, American-sponsored schools and colleges, and a reinvigorated public diplomacy effort. . . .

"We must also change a few minds in the United States and the West about the prospects of democracy in the Middle East. The success of democracy in the region is certainly not foreordained -- but neither is it foreclosed. The history of the twentieth century demonstrates convincingly that democracy can flourish in many locales and cultures not previously judged hospitable by doubters. The vibrant democracies in places like the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan show what can in fact be achieved. In his State of the Union address, the president said, 'This great republic will lead the cause of freedom.' That cause includes promoting democracy and liberty in the Middle East and unleashing the enormous capabilities of Middle Eastern women to contribute to the development of their region -- something that will benefit both men and women for generations to come."

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