

# Practical Ideas to Promote Democracy among America's Arab Friends

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## In-Depth Reports

**H**ayet Laouani, Tunisian National Federation of Transport: The Arab world is diverse. There are individual Arab countries, not just a single entity, that you can strictly call the "Arab world." Is there a deficit of democracy in those countries? Yes, but not a complete absence. What is missing is an understanding of what timetables, steps, priorities, and methods to activate in order to get safely on the path to democracy.

With regard to the timetable, for example, we must determine whether or not the situation is truly urgent or dangerous. I do not think so. Next, is the priority to build economies first or to move directly to the governmental level? In other words, should we adopt a sweet and slow approach to the big mess, or should we just step in and change the rules? I believe we need time.

In Tunisia, we began with women's rights -- the biggest issue for the country since independence. Education and health care used to be the most important goals, but now we say we have built the country "on two legs." Women are considered citizens with full rights. Promoting human rights and women's rights should be the first challenge for Arab countries before expecting larger changes. Why not set up an international observatory for human rights and freedom?

Tunisia has reached a kind of maturity. Now we think we are ready to move toward democracy without risking the stability and economy of the country. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have a big role to play. I would like to see some events like this one taking place in Arab countries, for example.

I do not see many Americans traveling around the Arab world, perhaps because they are afraid of the culture. But the American perception of Arab countries might be only a mirrored reflection. You must get to know the Arab world from the inside out, and not simply trust all the propaganda.

Rachid Slimi, al-Akawayn University: I would try to be practical, avoiding debate about the definitions of liberalization, democratization, and modernization. Instead, we need to look at how to move ahead.

Democracy is, no doubt, the key factor for any nation's prosperity. But in some areas, Morocco needs some liberalization; in others, democratization; and in others, modernization. There is a date that is very important for the country: 2010. Morocco is strongly committed to this date, because that year we are supposed to open up to international competition. Toward this end, over the last two decades, Morocco has undertaken many initiatives. I will mention a few of them.

Morocco has engaged in negotiations with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) about its structural- and social-adjustment programs. The country has also undertaken a process of privatization. It signed a free-trade agreement with the European Union. It is a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), and now it is finalizing a free-trade agreement with the United States. We also have the Agadir Declaration: in 2001, a few Arab countries -- including Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco -- met in the Moroccan city of Agadir to launch free markets among themselves in 2006.

Going through the course of modernization gives society a positive outlook. But to be realistic, it represents an initial splash rather than a sustainable trend. We must make progress cumulative in order to reach sustainable prosperity. Human capital is crucial in Morocco, which touches on education. Moroccan education has been criticized as being outdated. Reforms of the primary and secondary levels were initiated two years ago, but we need to work on the management and human-resources aspect. Let me explain. Educational reform in Morocco has always been perceived from its pedagogical perspective, with questions of management and human resources put aside. But if you do not have the good human resources and management, you will fail, even with good pedagogical content. So now we are trying to look at the education system comprehensively. We are also working to build consensus. There are longstanding conflicts between religious and political forces, unions, and others. To reach this consensus, it was necessary to establish a special commission.

Americans should work with Moroccan universities. Apart from al-Akhawayn -- a Moroccan university providing an international education based on the American model -- this kind of cooperation is not taking place. Inter-university cooperation provides an interesting space for the development of understanding and the revelation of common interests.

In the same context -- American and Moroccan universities -- Americans could help to create some think tanks, which are uncommon in Morocco. Take the example of Morocco's free-trade agreement with the United States. There are a lot of issues around this topic that require explanation and dissemination. What is the process leading up to such an agreement? What will be the impact for Americans? What will be the impact for Moroccans, and how will it affect our agreement with the European Union? A think tank could address such topics.

Then there is public administration. Moroccans suffer from bureaucracy. It is more or less clear to Moroccans that our current administration needs to be restructured to meet national challenges.

I do not look at women's empowerment from the feminist perspective. We have to back up and integrate women's empowerment into general policy development. We want to modernize and build a strong nation. Women's empowerment is a central concern in modern societies and, more particularly, Arab societies, but it should be perceived within a larger societal framework.

The media in Morocco play a very significant role in liberalization, speeding up the process of modernization more than some political forces. Now there is reform in this sector, and I invite Americans to work with us not only in investment, but also in terms of the quality of programming and production. By media, I mean not only television but also cinema, which is a new sector in our country.

America could also bring the Arab countries together at least once a year as France meets with the African countries annually to discuss common issues and share experiences. We Moroccans have a lot to learn from Jordan, from Dubai, from Tunisia. Unfortunately, we Arab countries do not communicate with each other.

In the field of security and the fight against terrorism, Morocco has a particular problem. We have intelligence and security services that work independently. Perhaps we can learn from America's post-September 11 experience in terms of getting our services to work together. After the May 16, 2003, terrorist attacks in Casablanca, we discovered that the services knew about the situation ahead of time, but they did not share information with one another. There

was no institutional cooperation.

We have an enormous number of NGOs in Morocco -- about two thousand of them -- but perhaps only ten or twenty are well organized with a sense of accountability. There is much work to do in terms of empowerment -- also for political parties. There is an urgent need to rehabilitate Moroccan politics; Morocco has at least thirty-six political parties. Two weeks ago, we held local elections. You cannot imagine the difference between the way the campaign was run by the local parties versus the way parliamentary campaigns are run. The local elections are completely different because they provide the people with the means and the money to manage their own local affairs. Among the projects before us is banning the establishment of parties along religious, ethnic, linguistic, or regional lines. We have to reinforce the accountability of parties in their management of public affairs.

Americans also have to be careful about the profiles and backgrounds of people they send to Morocco. We have had some unpleasant surprises. You have to know where your money goes, and it should be used efficiently. I mention this out of perplexity that some American NGOs are working with Islamist political parties in the context of cooperative programs, providing them with the necessary tools to succeed in their contact with voters.

Hala Mustafa, al-Dimuqratiya: Everyone knows the complications of talking about democracy in the Middle East. Usually when we talk about the process of democratization, we mention three main paths: contested elections, as in Eastern Europe; modernized economies, as in China and East Asia; and political liberalization. By the latter I mean adopting an incremental, evolutionary approach to reform from within the system.

Which of these three paths would best work in the Arab Muslim societies of the Middle East? I would argue that the first, which emphasizes the electoral dimension of democratization, is not suitable. It worked in Eastern Europe and could work in some other parts of the world, but it does not really suit Arab countries for several reasons. Elections can be a vehicle for change if other democratic institutions and liberal values are already in place (by liberal values I mean those that give priority to freedom of expression, individual rights, protection for minorities, freedom of worship, and so on). But without these, a merely electoral approach could lead us to "illiberal democracy," as Fareed Zakaria pointed out in his latest book, *The Future of Freedom*. This is the dilemma for the Arab world: we want to democratize, but we lack democratic institutions and liberal values. In their absence, we should not depend merely on the electoral dimension.

The Middle East is not Eastern Europe. In the late 1980s, when democracy swept that part of the European continent, we saw that a pro-Western culture preexisted there. Concepts of individualism were more inherent in that society, and the whole culture was more receptive to democratic change. This is not the case in Arab Muslim societies. For these reasons, we must go beyond the electoral approach in democratizing the Arab world.

It is simply unrealistic to talk about democracy in the Middle East without talking about modernizing, liberalizing, and secularizing Arab societies. These must come before electoral democratization. These processes would revitalize political life in the Middle East, and confront the "anti-individual" culture, or at least help to alleviate the political stagnation in the Arab world.

I believe there are two main factors behind this stagnation. The first is the so-called populist trends in Arab politics and culture. Pan-Arab nationalism and Islamism have been growing in the region since the 1950s, and both are deeply rooted in Arab political culture. These trends by nature contradict pluralism, democratic transformation, liberalism, individualism, and other Western values. The growth of the former trends has historically come at the expense of the liberal trends. We need to reconsider the populist trends that have done the undermining.

The second reason for political stagnation in Arab countries is the lack of value accorded to the individual. Arab culture and politics still express a kind of collectivism and anti-individualism that impede progress toward democracy. This ethic of collectivism can be seen in the heavy hand of the centralized state and in the patriarchal

focus of political Islam. It can also be seen in the socialism that impedes growth and progress in the private sector.

This is the predicament of the Arab world. Without promoting liberalism and backing liberal trends, we can expect nothing to change on either the economic or the political levels. First, we need to talk about reforming the Arab media. Instead of having just one voice expressing one political point of view all the time, we need to open the door to voices expressing a diversity of political visions. Second, we need to "rationalize" politics in the Arab world. Rationalizing Arab politics means undergoing a transformation from identity politics to performance politics. In other words, political success should depend on genuine achievement, not just on ideology and rhetoric.

The third issue here is the empowerment of women. I mention it not because I am a woman, but because this issue is important if we really want to talk about reform. Women's empowerment is not merely a social issue; it is mostly a political issue confronting patriarchal politics and culture. The issue of women has been used by Islamists and extremists as a tool in the Islamicization of Arab societies to gain political advantage. Most Arab governments sacrifice women's rights in their battles against the Islamists.

So when we talk about empowering women, we should not limit ourselves to a gender-based approach. In discussing real reform, we need to ensure greater representation of women in Arab political life. Women should be included in the decisionmaking process, taking into consideration that Arab women have never been so included. They were deprived of this right long ago.

The last issue I want to focus on is generational representation. Younger generations are not well represented in most Arab countries, politically or institutionally, and it is time to embrace them. A new generation is not only defined by age, but also by new ways of thinking. This is exactly what we need: to look to the future and not remain focused on the past.

Sa'eda Kilani, Transparency International: When Dr. Satloff asked me to speak about practical ideas to promote democracy, I found it ironic. There are no practical ideas. If there were, the Arab world would have had democracy a long time ago. Anyway, no one wants democracy in the Middle East. They see it as a Western term that we should not be applying. So, what am I going to talk about? (Laughter.)

Since the first moment of this conference, I have felt like a bit of an outsider. I have different views on practically everything that has been said here. I realize that we need events like this in our own countries. We need to reach out to people with other opinions. Arabs do not sit down and listen to other opinions. It is amazing that after this long day of sessions and hard work and discussion -- even after dinner -- people are still so attentive, listening to what we have to say. So we need this kind of activity as one step. But we also need to realize the practical realities of the Middle East. American terminology and ideologies are not well perceived in the region.

When there were calls for a boycott of American, Israeli, and British products in Arab countries, more than 60 to 70 percent of the Arab population joined the boycott at its peak. This shows that the American image is not a positive one in the Arab countries. The United States has to start with its own image. And I do not mean distributing publications like Hi magazine or Radio Sawa, because they are perceived as imperialistic media targeting the Arab world. I mean that the United States must start cooperative projects, projects that aim toward real democracy and real freedoms in the region.

Earlier, one of my colleagues asked me, "What do you want America to do to promote democracy?" I want America to support independent NGOs, not government-aligned NGOs. I want America to support independent people who genuinely believe in human rights and democracy. And he said, "America should not interfere in other peoples' business." I asked him, "Why did you ask me what America should do to promote democracy in the first place?"

America is interested in the Arab world politically. It is interested economically. And yes, it should be intervening and interfering on the human-rights level. Arab governments are interested in free-trade agreements; Americans

should be interested in seeing that if American investors in Arab countries have a case and need to go to court, there is an independent judiciary that will uphold their rights. There also needs to be free media. All of these organs should be in place and should be independent. Human rights should be upheld, because this is how we protect investors' rights as well.

Polishing America's image in the Arab world is not a simple task. But once that is achieved, there should be a concentration on Arab youth, Arab media, Arab women, and independent NGOs. I want to give some examples of activities in Jordan. We have worked and lobbied, hoping to see them prosper, but they never bear fruit. One of them is women's rights. With the support of the royal court and with the support of women's NGOs in Jordan, there was a proposal to ban "crimes of honor." As the law currently stands, if any male relative of a woman suspects that she has had an illicit relationship with a man outside the bonds of marriage, he can receive a light sentence for killing her.

Jordanians are coming to realize that this is a barbaric practice and should be abolished. There was a big campaign. There were demonstrations in front of parliament. The royal court supported reform. But they were lobbying for the wrong provision; all of them were calling to abolish "crimes of passion," not crimes of honor, because they did not understand the difference between the two. The provision for crimes of honor is Provision 98 of the penal code, and the other one is Provision 340. Parliament voted down a proposal banning crimes of passion. But everyone thought that the legislators had voted down the proposal banning crimes of honor. Now, the campaign will not back down because they do not want to admit their mistake.

We need to carry out studies in the Arab world on women, education, and other areas requiring reform. We need to know exactly what the problems are and identify their main elements, and only then determine what action to take.

In 1997, Jordan had a repressive press law pass, ending eight years of democratization. Journalists peacefully demonstrated in front of the Council of Ministers. They sent letters of protest. They wrote articles in newspapers. But their protests were quashed and repressed. Then they sued the government in court and won. The law was reversed. But the government rewrote the law, went back to parliament, and basically repromulgated a more repressive version. People understood from this lesson that at the end of the day their peaceful actions do not bear fruitful results.

This is really a shame. We need Europe and the United States, as well as international human-rights NGOs, to pressure Arab governments to act on human rights -- to compromise with their people. Otherwise, in the absence of democracy, the people just emigrate or join extremist groups.

Queen Rania is leading a strenuous effort to enhance women's rights in Jordan, and this is commendable. At an international women's conference in 2002, she announced that she supports abolishing crimes of honor, giving Jordanian women the right to divorce their husbands, and giving them the right to pass citizenship on to their children. Waves of shock ran through society. Of course, the queen's announcement was secretly appreciated by women's organizations. But the only women who were invited to the conference were the first ladies of Arab countries, senior officials, and other big shots. The real women who had worked for decades on improving the situation of women in Arab countries were not invited.

The result was that none of the Jordanian newspapers supported Queen Rania's efforts. Apart from a few articles here and there, there was only criticism for the kind of women's rights she had publicly supported. The independent NGOs and women's activists who have been working on these issues have not been recognized for their efforts. So the lobbying campaigns that should have preceded the queen's announcement were not there. Her proposals just came out of the blue and were a shock to society. You cannot abolish traditions overnight. You need broad-based public support. Whether that support comes from above or from the base, you have to lobby, but you also have to understand certain public sensitivities.

I would conclude my practical ideas for promoting democracy by inviting all Americans and human-rights activists to support independent groups in the Arab world, rather than the GoNGOs or the RoNGOs, as we call them. GoNGOs are the "governmental" nongovernmental organizations, and the recent RoNGOs are the royal NGOs that are doing human rights studies. We need to focus on real efforts -- not antagonizing governments, but rather understanding and dealing with them.

When we do so, we will exclude a lot of our fears and your fears. When we have human rights, it will eliminate most of the excuses proffered by the Islamist and extremist movements who are trying to attract the young. Their argument is that governments are repressing people, an argument that is essentially about human rights. You might be surprised by this. They are attracting the youth and everyone else to their movements essentially by claiming that people's human rights are being violated.

Shafeeq Ghabra, American University of Kuwait: Many of the issues in today's Middle East require a long-term, strategic approach. Without a long-term view, the Middle East will not be able to contribute anything to the world worthy of the region's history or its real capabilities. The talents of Middle Eastern peoples are enormous when you consider the various backgrounds, educational levels, and abilities (whether you look at people now living in the region or at those who have emigrated due to all the political and economic problems). There is much potential.

It is difficult to give advice, but American policy on democratization should be about consistency, with a long-term view. The United States needs to focus on what it says it will do and follow through on its commitments. To say something and not to follow through may work in other political circumstances, but not in this one. This is a region in a post-September 11 environment, a region with 70 percent of its population under the age of twenty-five, and a region that could potentially be torn in many directions. It could go the way of anarchy as much as toward state building and progress. It is a region that suffers from failed states. The Middle East as a whole needs serious, long-term rehabilitation to bring out its true potential.

The United States may not be fully aware of what it has done. Recently, it took two major regimes, one in Afghanistan and another in Iraq, and knocked them over. It created major change and made a major impression. Yes, America's image is damaged. But this is not the only issue; it is the impact that the regime change, particularly in Iraq, has made. It has raised so many questions about regimes and governments, about the role of intellectuals, about why the regime collapsed so quickly, and about the way political life is structured in the region. This has been a major earthquake, and the United States has to recognize it as such.

Iraq, in particular, has to come out right. There is no other way. America has to come through and do whatever it takes to build a healthy, new Iraq. Think of the scenario if America walks away: an Iraq in three pieces, probably in civil war. Think of the ramifications for the surrounding countries -- Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia -- and the example it would set. It would be a model of a failed state rather than a model for democracy. It would be a model for anarchy rather than a model for progress, modernization, and liberalization. It would be exactly the opposite consequence of what everyone argued for prior to war. Therefore, America has to come through.

The Iraqi war created a vacuum. It addressed one problem: Saddam Husayn. And it also created a range of new problems. It has strained many relations. It is raising questions within Arab society about human rights, women's rights, and the degree to which the United States will follow through on the principles and commitments that it has proclaimed. Solving these problems could bring about a different Iraq and could also contribute to a new Middle East. The Arab world is politicized, but many today who have been stunned by what happened have taken a step back and are asking fresh questions. We have an opportunity to look at the region differently and to seek answers in a new direction.

So the situation is in flux. What comes next, what fills the vacuum, is the big question. It could be anarchy on the one

hand, or state building, modernity, and progress on the other. It is not like 1967 -- which represented a different kind of defeat for the Arab world, and one that the Arab world faced in another way. Arab countries came together in those days by unifying their positions at a set of Arab conferences, by supporting the Palestinian movement emerging from the defeat of the 1967 war, and by supporting Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser as he underwent the War of Attrition. But this present moment is worse -- a combination of 1967 and Napoleon's 1798 invasion of Egypt. The Arab world will not be able to react in the same way. This time, it will have to look inward.

But America needs to recognize what it is doing, and whether its policies will lead to a better course of action on all fronts, including the Arab-Israeli and Palestinian- Israeli peace processes. For democracy and a peaceful state of mind to prosper in the region, peace between Palestinians and Israelis is a must. This matter needs a parallel approach.

Marvin Kalb, Harvard University: You all agree that women should have more rights in the Arab world, even equal rights with men; that there should be a freer media; and you all spoke in favor of modernization. But the idea of democratization, as that word would be used here in the United States, seems beyond your reach.

President Bush's Iraq policy is based on the idea of using that country as a model for the democratization of the entire Arab world. I got the impression that you all think this is an unrealistic goal, too far-fetched, and perhaps even dangerous. Is that correct?

Kilani: I do not believe democratization is far-fetched. Anything can happen. Freedom can happen if there is the will. This is the case all over the world. The problem is that in Arab countries, when you work toward freedom and democratization, they tell you, "We are not ready." The joke is that in 100 years, we will have a free newspaper; in 1,000 years, that newspaper will have an independent editor; and then in 10,000 years, it will have independent journalists. They keep telling us that we are not ready. When will we be ready?

I do not believe Iraq is a good example. We have seen how the United States sides with religious and tribal leaders there and then tells us that America is bringing democracy to Iraq. We want the Americans to set an example in that country, to bring into leadership independent intellectuals -- not the religious leaders that we are trying to get rid of in our own Arab countries.

Ghabra: Democratization will happen in the Arab world. Once Iraq is stabilized, it will be very hard to rule Iraq in the brutal way of Saddam Husayn. The potential for democratization in Iraq is great. Yet democracy and liberalism work together; the former without the latter will not work. Syria will have to democratize, and if it does not, it will face serious problems. The alternative to democratization is anarchy and radicalization. Therefore, I expect that we will see attempts at democratization and opening up in other Arab states. Some will fail. Some will begin the process and abandon it. Others will persevere.

Democracy will come. It is boiling in the Arab world. Whether we see it in five years or in seven years, it is a long-term trend. If Iraq comes through as a model, whether under existing leadership or under another, that model will have an impact. The Arab world cannot and will not be an exception to world trends.

Mustafa: None of us denies the importance of democratization. The suggestions I made were meant to help in democratizing Arab and Muslim societies. We are talking about societies that differ greatly from those in Europe or Asia that are already a part of the current wave of democracy. I emphasize that if you have a society where religion still overlaps with politics, a value like tolerance is unlikely to be embraced by the majority.

In this context, I would differentiate between electoral democracy and liberal democracy. Electoral democracy is potentially obtainable in the Arab world. You could run elections tomorrow, but the result would not be very impressive. In the absence of liberal forces, under the current consensus where the populist Islamist trends dominate most of Arab society, elections tomorrow could bring in a new regime of the Iranian, Saudi, or Sudanese

type. That is not exactly the kind of democracy we are looking for. So some liberal reforms should be adopted before focusing on elections.

Democracy, by definition, is a long-term process. It came to Europe over decades, not overnight. And it did not happen in a premodern society. Only after Europe developed a degree of modernism, industrialization, and liberal culture, did the continent attain political democracy.

Slimi: As I said earlier, democracy is the key factor for any nation's prosperity, but I see it in terms of its productive capacity. Democracy is supposed to generate an added value for the nation. How can you speak about democratization when it comes to countries like Morocco, where the rate of illiteracy is about 46 percent? A large part of the country has to be included in the process in a manner that takes into account its diversity. Productive democracy means building a state that mobilizes the energies of its people. So for this process to work, you have to include the people, and the people should be educated and skillful. It will be a long process but we are moving ahead.

Dennis Ross, The Washington Institute: I want to come back to an issue Dr. Ghabra raised. He said an earthquake has taken place, and no one knows what effect it will have on the region. I want to ask you about the effect of success or failure in Iraq. Will your regimes deal with you -- as liberal reformers in the Arab world -- differently if America succeeds in Iraq?

Ghabra: One result of an American failure would be the strengthening of the Islamists. This would spur the most narrow-minded interpretations from that camp. "The superpower came," they would say, "knocked over the regime, and then was defeated. It could not accomplish its goals. America will never dare do the same thing to any other regime in the region because it failed in Iraq." This would be a nightmare scenario. Many liberal activists with options would leave the Arab world. The region would suffer a migration -- the emigration of many important people and much capital. Success in Iraq would mean the reverse of many things I just described.

Kilani: I have a totally different point of view. Neither success nor failure in Iraq can move any Arab leader. We keep claiming that this or that circumstance will change them. But in actuality, whatever happens will happen. Arab leaders will stay, and they will not change. There will not be freedom or democratization or anything positive. Perhaps they will listen to us on some small things, but there will be no change, no earthquakes.

Robert Satloff, The Washington Institute: One could make an argument that Arab regimes are quite befuddled. There is no good outcome in Iraq: U.S. success or failure might be equally dangerous for them. Our failure in Iraq spawns all sorts of radicals and movements, and our success empowers us and empowers reformers like you, which is not good news for them. This, in my view, really gets to the heart of why so many countries around the region were not excited about what we did in Iraq. ❖

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