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**"Pushing Democracy Over Dictatorships:  
U.S. must support liberty, change in Arab world now"**

**By Kenneth W. Stein**

Arab countries are in shambles. Exploding populations outstrip economic growth. Educational systems are mired in memorization, not critical thinking. Women remain second class citizens.

Assertions of corruption, nepotism and weakness prevail. Autocratic leaders slow the pace of political reform. Civil society growth efforts are stifled. Finger-pointing is directed at Arab leaders for their collective lack of courage and failure to define a positive direction.

A lack of Arab control of Arab destiny eats at the national fiber. While globalization progresses, Arab states are benefiting little. Frustration about the future has caused 38 percent of young Arab males in the Middle East to indicate a strong desire to leave the region to pursue a life elsewhere, preferably in Europe.

These are not the assessments of a Bush neo-con, a Zionist sympathizer or an "Orientalist" who only sees the Arab world through the prism of Western values. These are timely evaluations by Arab commentators, analysts, social scientists and intellectuals. Read the recently released Arab Human Development Report along with its counterpart of a year ago ([www.undp.org/rbas/ahdr/english2003.html](http://www.undp.org/rbas/ahdr/english2003.html)).

Problems of Arab society are cited almost daily in newspapers across the Arabic-speaking world. These are not issues that can be blamed on President Bush or British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and resolving the Palestinian issue will not make these problems evaporate.

Although Bush's November speech to the National Democratic Institute focused on the need to establish democracies in Middle Eastern Arab states to approach this laundry list of problems, it will be a difficult, if not impossible task to erect democracy as we know it in most Middle Eastern states.

Major hurdles block the establishment of Western democracies in most of the Arab Middle East. First, there is the entrenched legacy of the few controlling the will of the many. Second, the region's social norms still cling to fossilized traditions, autocratic privilege, Islam's role in daily life

and staunch preservation of communal rights.

Third, Arab personal and national pride, though frustrated and angry about the current state of general malaise, characterize Bush's remarks about establishing democracies in the Middle East as paternalistic, the mark of a foreign imperialist seeking to tutor the native. It is feasible to establish governance structures where diverse views are heard and collective decisions are made for a common good. Devolution of power from centralized autocrats or one-party dominance to provincial or local authorities is possible in Iraq, Afghanistan and a newly established Palestinian state. Most likely, the rate of political transformation in these and other Middle Eastern areas is expected to be glacial, unless a leader or leaders step forward to lead the kind of accelerated change that Ataturk undertook in Turkey in the 1920s or Egyptian President Anwar Sadat accepted in his relations with Israel in the 1970s.

It would be inexcusable not to encourage and support the establishment of workable governing structures in Iraq, in Afghanistan and among the Palestinians; it behooves us to listen to what Arab writers say about the absence but need for democracy in the Arab world.

In the prestigious Egyptian daily al-Ahram on May 31, 2001, Salaheddin Hafez noted that "the atmosphere in the Arab world is so suffocating. Avenues of freedom ... growing ever broader all around the world, are actually shrinking in the Arab world. Our countries are sailing against the tide of humanity. We are opposing democracy with a doggedness that is unseemly for people with such an ancient civilization and such a promising future."

In late April 2003, a poll undertaken by the Arab satellite network al-Jazeera reportedly found that "more than 80 percent of respondents said that they preferred Western colonialism to Arab dictatorships."

In Iraq, no one is expecting a checks-and-balances system to emerge. There is a chance to assist Arab peoples who look for a better tomorrow without being paternalistic today. To forgo this opportunity makes those of us on the sidelines appear haughty, myopic, selfish and perhaps even racist.

Emerging governing structures where people participate in determining their own future without the brutality of the state facing them everyday will have consequential effects elsewhere in Arab Middle Eastern countries.

Said the veteran Arab political commentator Toufik Abu-Bakr in the Jordanian daily al-Dustour on May 30, 2003, "I still believe in the ... opportunity to push liberalism in the Arab world ... the concept of foreign

humanitarian intervention must be nurtured and supported under strict guidelines in order to rescue peoples from cruel (Arab) dictatorships they cannot get rid of themselves.

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