SUMMARY OF AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE ROUNDTABLE ON DEMOCRATIC REFORM AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

Held in New York

March 29, 2004
Our Mission

The National Committee on American Foreign Policy was founded in 1974 by Professor Hans J. Morgenthau and others. It is a nonprofit activist organization dedicated to the resolution of conflicts that threaten U.S. interests. Toward that end, the National Committee identifies, articulates, and helps advance American foreign policy interests from a nonpartisan perspective within the framework of political realism.

American foreign policy interests include

- preserving and strengthening national security;
- supporting countries committed to the values and the practice of political, religious, and cultural pluralism;
- improving U.S. relations with the developed and developing worlds;
- advancing human rights;
- encouraging realistic arms-control agreements;
- curbing the proliferation of nuclear and other unconventional weapons;
- promoting an open and global economy.

Believing that an informed public is vital to a democratic society, the National Committee offers educational programs that address security challenges facing the United States and publishes a variety of publications, including its bimonthly journal, American Foreign Policy Interests, that present keen analyses of all aspects of American foreign policy.
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Dear Reader:

On March 29, 2004, the National Committee on American Foreign Policy convened its fourth closed-door and off-the-record roundtable on the Middle East. The first roundtable of Muslim scholars, former diplomats, and specialized journalists addressed the question “Can Muslims Accept Israel in Their Midst?” (May 9, 2001); the second the issue of “Militant Islamic Fundamentalism in the 21st Century” (January 10, 2002); the third the problem of “Reform and Human Development in the Muslim World” (March 20, 2003); and the fourth the question of “Democratic Reform and the Role of Women in the Muslim World (March 29, 2004).”

This latest roundtable confirmed the conclusions reached by the previous ones as well as the threads that run through them: (1) The mind-set of many of the people of the region has not changed significantly for a long period of time; (2) the underdevelopment of the countries is largely self-inflicted; (3) women’s equal rights should be recognized and implemented; (4) major U.S. and other Western educational and economic efforts are needed to help the region lift itself out of underdevelopment and become receptive to new ways of thinking; (5) Muslim intellectuals living in the West must be mobilized to help bring about necessary reforms; (6) it is seemingly impossible, according to fundamentalist interpretations of sharia (Muslim law), for Muslims to engage in strategic coexistence with Israel or with the “infidel” Christian West; (7) democratic reforms cannot be imposed by Western countries and should be initiated by Muslims themselves.

The National Committee on American Foreign Policy is especially grateful to Mutual of America, Mrs. Eugenie Fromer, and Ms. Sheila Johnson Robbins for providing major support for the fourth roundtable. The National Committee also acknowledges the generous support given to us by an anonymous donor and by Kenneth J. Bialkin, Esq., Nina Rosenwald, and the Edith C. Blum Foundation.

Sincerely,

George D. Schwab
President
INTRODUCTION

Questions concerning democratic reform and the role of women in the Muslim world have preoccupied Muslim intellectuals and political and religious leaders since the 19th century. In recent years they have become more acute, pitting religious radicals against progressive elements, as well as foreigners. In a way these issues are at the heart of mounting terrorist activities perpetrated by organizations such as Al Qaeda and its ilk. They have naturally become a concern in foreign policy planning. Since the attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001, the war against international terrorism has highlighted the dangers of militant Islamic fundamentalism and the necessity of defeating it everywhere in the world, including Muslim countries. That is why the National Committee on American Foreign Policy thought it appropriate to convene a roundtable on “Democratic Reform and the Role of Women in the Muslim World.” The roundtable consisted of several Muslim experts in these fields and a number of interested participants and observers.

The purpose of this not-for-attribution summary report is to make available to the foreign policy community the views and suggestions that were voiced at the March 29, 2004, roundtable.
Islam and Democracy

Some commentators have concluded that democracy and Islam are incompatible. They usually cite an 1879 essay by Jamal-ad-Din Afghani titled “Despotic Government” written after he traveled to Europe. The famous Muslim scholar, while praising “constitutional governments,” wrote that Muslim countries were not ready for such systems because of (1) their “long experience under despotism”; (2) the “rule of superstition rather than reason”; (3) their opposition to and ignorance of the “true sciences.” Afghani added that the best for which Muslims could “presently hope” was a “benevolent, enlightened paternalistic despot (who) would introduce the new scientific and technological knowledge of the West and a more humane form of government.” More than a century after the publication of Afghani’s essay, Muslim countries are still living under authoritarian if not completely despotic governments. Even Turkey’s regime, often cited as an example of “Islamic democracy,” violates human rights from time to time, and its military establishment intervenes once in a while to “safeguard” its “secularized” constitution.

Despite Afghani’s assessment, it does not seem that Islam and democracy are incompatible. Actually fundamentalist interpretations of any religion (or secular ideology, for that matter) beget intolerance and despotism. The fact is that after its relatively tolerant first three centuries of existence, the Muslim world suddenly closed itself, and diverse fundamentalist interpretations of the Koran won the upper hand. Muslims rejected most of their own scientists and philosophers as heretics, burned their books, and repudiated all forms of innovation. While the West gradually shed the grip of religious fundamentalism and started a steady growth in the fields of science and technology, accompanied by the gradual development of liberal democratic institutions, the Muslim world marked time and never recovered the vitality of its heyday. When the shock of Bonaparte’s Egyptian fray awoke it from its slumber, it could not confront the invading forces. Large parts of its territories were colonized in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Reformist movements sprang up almost everywhere. But the modernizing elements were countered by clerics who fought all “deviations” from classical interpretations of the Koran. The immobility of Muslim societies continued despite national liberation movements after World War II.

At the same time in the West, science and technology underwent tremendous advances, and the pace of change accelerated, widening the already existing deep gap with the Muslim world.

The End of Patriarchy in the West

This growing divide constitutes in itself a formidable obstacle to democratic reforms. Indeed it concerns not only economic and technological matters that can be addressed through UN technical and other forms of assistance but also involves mind-sets and all aspects of social organization. Historically all known human societies have been more or less based on the “patriarchal” model featuring
male preeminence at every level. The introduction of diverse forms of
democracy in Europe gradually eroded this model. But patriarchial
remnants in Western countries constituted a kind of “surviving link”
with the Muslim world that had remained almost unchanged for some
centuries. There, especially in many Middle Eastern areas, patriarchy
and male dominance, often reinforced by the continuation of tribalism,
survived in full force.

In Europe and North America, things moved rapidly in the 20th century.
In the first decades of the century, women initiated a sustained struggle
for equality with men. In 1948 the UN adopted the Universal Declaration
of Human Rights (UDHR) that contained some revolutionary concepts
even for the advanced West. A variety of other “human rights” conventions
followed. They concerned genocide, the elimination of all forms of racism
and discrimination, the elimination of discrimination against women, the
rights of children, the interdiction of torture, and so on.

Concurrently “paternal authority” began to be contested both at the level
of society and individual families, and the contest developed rapidly. It
can be said in a way that the “feminist” movement and the student revolt
of the 1960s reflected deep structural changes that were occurring in
Western societies. The last vestiges of patriarchy melted away. Even
societies at the periphery of Western democracies followed suit. The Soviet
bloc collapsed while the United States leaped into a new era of total
democracy, intensifying globalizing forces galvanizing the planet.

At the same time the “information revolution” spread new ideas and
innovations everywhere, including Muslim countries where some
violent reactions erupted. Indeed the “quasi-death” of patriarchy in
the West and the stated goal of the United States to push for
democratic reform endangered the “patriarchal-tribal” structures
of Muslim societies. It was not a matter of chance that the first
violent reactions against the West came from an Iranian mullah
and a Saudi clan member.³

Destabilization
The incompatibility does not reside between Islam and democracy but
between fundamentalist interpretations of the religion and democratic
principles. The so-called American Greater Middle East Initiative,
which calls for democratic reforms in that part of the Muslim world,
certainly corresponds to a long due necessity, but it cannot be imposed
from outside. Present Muslim regimes might cooperate in the war
against terrorism, but they would probably oppose democratization
directly or indirectly, which in practice would mean the end of their
grip on power.

Even when a younger generation of Arab experts and leaders⁴ are
genuinely aware of the necessity of reform, they want to introduce
it gradually in order, they say, to avoid destabilization. Indeed how
can one change a social order maintained in quasi-fixity for centuries
without provoking serious disruptions? At any rate, if the United
States is sincere in its move to change the Middle East, it should
help existing Muslim reformist movements inside and outside the
Muslim world, including those aimed at political freedom and the
empowerment of women.

**Gender Equity**

If legal equality between men and women is far from being implemented in the Muslim world, gender equity is progressing in some countries. Thus in Egypt, for instance, it has developed across almost all professions, including governmental bureaucracy. There are women in the Egyptian National Assembly (parliament), in political parties, in the media, in public and private offices, and so on. But this equality is not inscribed in laws: It is more cultural than legal. Moreover, gender equity does not mean that women are not discriminated against in a number of cases as a result of religious constraints and general mores and practices.

In order to expand the trend of gender equity and increase women's contributions to advancing society, one should use what can be dubbed as the “cultural-educational connection”: Indeed many opportunities for education and employment exist, especially in the private sector. In this respect significant additional resources should be allotted through universities and other institutions of higher education for women's education and professional training. The admission of women to schools, universities, and specialized centers should be expanded, and both the government and the private sector should be encouraged to increase employment opportunities in their favor.

At any rate, in promoting democratic reforms in the Muslim world, it is preferable to adopt a “soft approach” rather than impose measures forcefully through laws and law enforcement agencies. In Egypt, as well as in some other parts of the Muslim world, the cultural sector has been undervalued if not totally neglected. Most of the developmental projects concern economic and technical matters. They tend to ignore cultural and educational domains. The universities of Cairo and Alexandria should be supported more vigorously and endowed with greater financial resources.

Some experts consider that a radical change in the curricula is necessary. That, however, does not seem to be the best way to introduce democratic reforms. Correcting and improving the existing curricula would constitute a preferable and less controversial means of change.

To achieve positive results professors and journalists should get together in workshop discussions where they could talk among themselves about pressing issues and determine needs as well as ways and means to realize them.

Mention was made of the Steering Committee of the Association for Arab Women whose members are accomplished women leaders. This organization is active and should be supported through a network of connections with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the Western world.

**Islam and Women**

It was observed that there is “something” in the mainstream practice of Islam, not in its ideals, that is deeply opposed to women. The
“madrassas” (Koranic schools), for instance, spread two major messages about women. The first one is based on the pretense that women are “inferior” to men. The second teaches that women should not be “trusted.” These schools do not try to advance or elaborate on any justification of these assertions. In the same way in which they contend that Jews and Christians are conspiring against Islam, they contend that women cannot assume positions of leadership in any undertaking.

These antiwomen teachings result in blatant injustices and often in terrible atrocities against women in Muslim societies. Several recent examples were stated. Among them was highlighted the case of a Nigerian woman who had been raped. She was treated as though she had engaged in extramarital sex, which is considered an offense by Islamic courts. She produced seven witnesses to the rape but to no avail. Despite all efforts and interventions, she was condemned to receive 180 lashes.

Another example was that of a woman accused of lesbian relations. She was stoned to death. On a less tragic level, examples were mentioned of blatant discrimination against women; thus in some countries such as Saudi Arabia, women can legally possess cars but cannot drive them.

The question was raised as to how such basic injustices can be reconciled with articles of faith. Muslim “liberals” affirm that those kinds of injustices have no place in “true” Islam. It was said that in its ideals Islam is favorable to women and that Muslims are far from being misogynists. Muhammad’s first wife, who was fifteen years older than he, was a successful commercially independent trader. Moreover, according to some verses in the Koran, women can reject marriage or impose their own conditions in the marriage contract. But Muslim “liberals” gloss over other parts of the Koran in which it is said that “women are your fields” to do with as you please or that men, as “providers” for the family, stand over and control women.

In short, there is a serious imbalance between men and women in the Muslim world. It is true that the Koran, like the Bible, contains contradictory points. In any case, clerics and jurisprudents tend to interpret and uphold only the verses hostile to women. Therefore, women should highlight the passages that are favorable to them.

Mention was also made of the so-called honor killings of women that are current in the Muslim world and happen even sometimes among Muslim immigrants in the West. It was emphasized that such crimes have nothing to do with Islam. They are the consequence of Arab tribal traditions embedded in the practice of the religion. As a result, women can be murdered with total impunity. It was said that this tradition is now used by terrorist organizations such as Hamas to train women who have “shamed” their families as suicide bombers; in this way, say terrorist leaders, they atone and obtain God’s pardon and at the same time restore the “stained” honor of their families.

Women and their organizations should seriously question the practice of “honor killing,” and should “reopen” the doors of _ijtihad_ (independent thinking) encouraged by the Koran. The “doors” of _ijtihad_ were “closed”
by clerics around and after the 12th century. Women need to democratize and popularize independent thinking and undertake the duty of reinterpreting the sacred texts. In this context, women should ask questions about a larger share in communal property.

Concerning economic problems, Muslim women who have the necessary means should help other Muslim women to open and run small enterprises. Modest loans should be provided for that purpose. When women have their own money, they can spend it to learn reading and writing and to create their own businesses. In Afghanistan, “microloans” (of about 100 dollars) have allowed more than 600 women to operate small, prosperous enterprises. Such “microfinancing” would help introduce and strengthen lasting democratic reforms. If extended to other Muslim countries, particularly Iraq, this trend might help establish democracy. Indeed Iraq needs a broad business class, including women “capitalists,” to compel government accountability. The United States should encourage and support in various ways the spread of businesses owned by women.

The panel was reminded that the “Alexandria Declaration,” adopted on March 19, 2004, recommended swift democratic reforms. It stressed the following points among others: trade liberalization, political accountability, women’s rights, and so on. A system of microloans could prove instrumental in this respect.

**Resistance and Progress**

It was stated that a change in the status of women, as well as the introduction of other democratic reforms, would meet stiff resistance when imposed or even suggested from the outside world. Therefore, reforms should be initiated by Muslim women and men. Muslims see any move undertaken or inspired by the West as suspect.

Moreover, Muslim countries invoke a variety of excuses in order to postpone or slow down the pace of change. This is mainly due to the fact that rulers as well as local tribal leaders fear that democracy would diminish their authority and grip on power. Some governments say that change should come very slowly, cautiously, and, above all, gradually because haste would be used by “Islamists” in order to expand their influence on the masses. There is also the problem of creating insecurity and destabilization by introducing democratic reforms in tribal societies.

Notwithstanding this resistance and these arguments, relative progress has been achieved in some areas in implementing human rights in general and women’s emancipation in particular. These changes are coming not in the form of altered religious interpretations but in the practical domains of culture and political life. Moreover, there are deep differences from country to country. Thus in some Asian countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia, women have achieved the highest political positions. They have been elected to the office of prime minister and president of the nation. Women also have achieved appreciable progress in the Persian Gulf States, especially in the domains of health and social services.

In some countries a lot of changes took place in the 1960s and 1970s
without any reform in religious interpretations. Women are now participating in television programs even in Saudi Arabia (where they wear the proper headdress). For the first time an official document mentioning discrimination against women as one of the essential causes of backwardness is being distributed freely. Indeed the Arab Human Development Report of 2002 cites restrictions imposed on women as one of the three “deficits” that hamper progress in the Arab world. (The other two are the absence of political freedom and the low level and inadequacy of education.) Moreover, it is obvious that keeping half the population at bay does not encourage an economic breakthrough.

Despite the level of progress achieved, many problems remain and are even getting more acute. Resistance to change increased in the 1980s for several reasons. The collapse of the postwar nationalist movements opened the door to the most extremist religious elements and to traditionalist tribal leaders on the political level. With the rise of authoritarian if not completely despotic governments and the absence of political freedom in almost all Muslim societies, mosques became the only venues for political expression and activity. Women’s condition, always the result of the general social environment, was marked by some degree of regression. Mind-sets were slow to change. To many activists it appeared that the problem of women was more political than religious. It was a problem of human rights. A flood of advice poured in from the West. But it proved to be barely helpful. Change would have to come from inside.

**Reform and the Situation of Women**

No democratic reform can fructify in the Muslim world without a change in the condition of women. It is imperative that they achieve equal treatment. Attention was called to the existence in Egypt and other Arab countries of women’s groups and associations that challenge male dominance and misogyny in current interpretations of religion. Before democratic reform can proceed, women must be educated to achieve awareness of all their rights, including political and religious rights, making it possible for them to participate in and contribute to all aspects of life in their societies.

Women scholars in the Muslim world are reinterpreting the Koran in a more equalitarian way. Throughout the Muslim world, from North Africa and the Middle East to Southeast Asia, individual women and members of women’s rights groups, possessing different cultures and languages but sharing faith and goals, are creating a momentum for reform that few would have predicted. The winds of change are already blowing in many areas of the Muslim world.6

References were made to the Beijing conference and other international gatherings on the subject of the status of women. The resolutions of such meetings possess a great general value because they draw attention to the plight of women. But practically they have had scant effect on real change in Muslim countries.

“Surface issues” such as wearing veils or headgear or not driving cars are secondary and should not hide the real problems of inequality and...
discrimination. What women need in practice are laws that give them choices. The true issue is employment. In many Muslim countries women are poor and have been consigned to their homes.

Some improvements are happening here and there. The employees of an oil company in Saudi Arabia voted recently for the inclusion of a woman in the steering committee of their union, and in Saudi Arabia, as well as in some other countries, the necessity of reform related to women is discussed in relation to the candidacy of such countries for membership in the World Trade Organization.

Nonetheless, the fact remains that men often embrace “liberal” positions only to apologize later to religious traditionalist elements. Both men and women should understand that it is not “shameful” to promote women’s rights. Liberals and moderates must speak out. They must not leave it to bin Laden and his ilk to represent Islam. Organizations connected with human rights should become involved in monitoring the problem of women in the Muslim world.

American Muslims can be very helpful. The more they affirm that civil liberties are important, the more that affirmation will allow Muslims around the world to understand and appreciate the essential role played by human rights in generating reform. Reform in the Muslim world is often thought to be threatened by the urge of women to promote reform. This constitutes a kind of “red line,” which does not demarcate a fight with the West.

Reform, Politics, and Theology

In the 19th century the Western powers defeated the Ottoman Empire in Central Europe and the Balkans, and Persia was defeated by Russia in the Caucasus and northern Azerbaijan. The shock of these setbacks provoked the idea of reform both among the ruling classes and the intelligentsia. The former created Western types of armies and bureaucracies without changing the social and political structures of their societies. The latter tried to kindle reform movements in order to transform their countries in depth. By 1905 a constitutional revolution was able to impose a parliamentary system and end the absolutism of the shah of Iran. In the early 1920s in Turkey, Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk) abolished the empire, as well as the caliphate, and replaced them with a secular constitutional republic.

Everywhere in the Muslim world intellectuals seemed fascinated with European political and philosophical ideas. They read and referred to Voltaire and Montesquieu, as well as Marx and Lenin. It was as if they had forgotten their own very rich political and philosophical literature. They criticized religion, forgetting that reform should not be a war against God but rather a political fight against despotism that dominated the Muslim world. Indeed democracy is about changing mind-sets. It is about “doubt,” which is inconsistent with religion. The problem facing all reformers is not making a theological issue of reform but treating it as a political one. They should aim at creating an open space in society for political debate.

Contrary to current opinion, there is no such thing as a coherent “Muslim world.” There are 57 countries in which Islam is the majority religion,
and most of them are run by undemocratic regimes.

Moreover, those countries are far from being religiously homogeneous: They comprise multiple minorities—sects and religious groups have proliferated since Muhammad’s death in the 7th century. To cite only one example, there are 80 different groups in Lebanon, the second smallest Muslim country.

One must also make a distinction between Islam as a belief system and Islam as an “existential” reality that is open to political and social criticism. Each Muslim country should be considered individually. One cannot apply a single policy to all Muslim countries.

**How to Help Reformers?**

Attempts at de-Islamification have been made in several countries but to no avail. Wave after wave of liberalizing ideas and techniques have come from the West, but local leaders have resisted them, invoking a variety of excuses such as cultural differences and traditional values. Very often such excuses do not withstand scrutiny. In any case, the reformers should concentrate on developing civil society and democratic institutions in their countries.

As to how change can be advanced in Muslim countries, it was recalled that most countries have signed and ratified the Charter of the UN and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as other international treaties, but have not really and practically implemented them and apparently do not intend to put them into effect. Actually not only do most leaders gloss over their international obligations, but they often violate their own national laws. The West should remain wary and use aid money not for the security of autocratic regimes but for democratization. It should create something like the Helsinki process that proved so effective during the cold war in improving human rights in communist countries. Such a system would force governments to honor their signatures on international agreements.

It was remarked that many in the Muslim world do not believe that the United States is committed to help democratization. Indeed for a long time America and the West have supported corrupt governments and continue to do so. They often disagree about the way to deal with Muslim countries. Therefore, Western powers should pull their act together and help reformers in Muslim countries. Many opportunities exist in this respect. The example of Iran was cited. It was said that “Islamism” has been almost completely defeated there and that the old left is moribund.

The United States can help practically by creating a framework for a dialogue and treat each Muslim country according to the ways in which it behaves nationally and internationally. For instance, it should not give all Muslim leaders the same red carpet treatment when they come to Washington. It should clearly differentiate between “friends” and “enemies.” United States financial assistance should not be limited to providing security. It should extend to NGOs, active elements of civil societies, and the like.
DISCUSSIONS

Islamic Political Thought
Reference was made to the remark of one of the presenters that everywhere in the Muslim world the intellectual elite, fascinated with European ideas, seems to have forgotten its own heritage involving Muslim political thinkers of the first three or four centuries of Islam. The reason, it was suggested, was that with the triumph of fundamentalism during and after the 12th century, the clerics and authorities condemned most philosophers and scientists as heretics and rejected access to their works. Books were burned or banned, and a kind of “witch hunt” dried up thinking with very few exceptions for almost eight centuries. Contrary to what Professor Edward Said wrote in his polemical book titled *Orientalism*, the works of Muslim philosophers of the first centuries of Islam were rediscovered by “Orientalists” and brought to the attention of Muslims. That was probably why Muslim intellectuals tended to ignore their own political thinkers and rushed to Western philosophers.

The presenter agreed and added that one of his dreams is republishing all the books of these writers in editions accessible to Muslim masses who would then discover that they had their own heritage of political thought. He cited the names of Farabi, Ibn Roshd (Averroes), Ibn Battuta, Nizam-ol-Molk, Nasser Khosrow, Ibn Khaldun, and others. Those philosophers developed a “democratic” political thought that shows that introducing democratic reform in the Muslim world would not be an imposition from outside. Instead, it has solid sources in the thinking of ancient Muslim philosophers. He also named some writers of the second half of the 19th century whose books have disappeared: The Crimean Ismail Aga Sprinski, a forerunner of the idea of reconsidering the status of women in Islam; he opened the first schools for girls and said that if one had to choose between sending a son or a daughter to school, it is better to send the latter because she will be a mother and will teach all her children to read and write; Mirza Ibrahimof, a Tatar, who convened the first conference on the theme of “What Happened to the Muslims?” in order to discuss why most Muslims were under colonial rule; Manutchehr Mirza, who was one of the founders of the Freemason Society in Iran and wrote about secularism and democracy; and many others.

Names of some contemporary thinkers were also mentioned: A. Kasravi, A. Abdel Malek, A. Laroui, A. al Fasi, M. Arkoun, A. An Naim, and others.

This panelist concluded that Muslims have to revive their own cultural and political traditions in order to be able to join the universal thinking about problems that face humanity as a whole and not remain in the opposition. These political thinkers are in fact the precursors of reform and modernization in Islam.

Political Obstacles
One panelist remarked that the advocates of democratic reform in Muslim countries more often than not run up against a wall that is the
political structure of most ruling regimes. As Professor Fouad Ajami recently wrote, “There is no prospect that the rulers of Arab lands will offer their people a decent social contract.” Reformers should find ways to overcome the serious political obstacle that autocratic regimes and leaders constitute on the road to change. Another participant stated that Arab rulers do not want satellite dishes that undermine their monopoly on information. They have proliferated anyway. This participant added that many women activists have received expressions of thanks from individual Muslims around the world for expressing their thoughts and ideas in public, unlike others who are silent because they fear persecution. Even if one can forgive that kind of fear on the part of people exposed to national repression, how can one excuse such a fear on the part of Muslims living in North America and Europe? The latter often use their hatred of Israel and their vitriol for the Bush administration as excuses for not criticizing the way Islam is practiced today.

In this respect another panelist considered that there are two layers of political obstacles that prevent Arab people from achieving their rights. It is true that many rulers do not want change and resist it. But there is a new wave of younger leaders in a number of countries such as Bahrain, Jordan, and Morocco who back change at least to a certain extent. But they are faced with resistance from their parliaments in many cases. In Kuwait, for instance, governments have tried time after time to pass laws that would grant women the right to vote and run for office, but the tribal and conservative elements that represent a majority in parliament have opposed such reforms.

It was added that a similar situation exists in some countries regarding so-called honor killings. In Jordan at least twice the government tried to push forward new laws to punish people who perpetrate these murders. It did not succeed. It was said that the two sets of political obstacles facing the Arab world are real. Nevertheless, some form of change will certainly come in response to internal and external pressures.

Several participants were of the opinion that the problem of democratic reforms is more of a political than a religious nature. Indeed it depends on what governments do. If they decide to elevate the sharia as the only law of their countries, they obviously will subject their people to a different kind of regime than democracy, as happened in the case of the Taliban in Afghanistan. A panelist remarked that most Muslim countries have Western-style constitutions; moreover, the sharia applies to private rather than public questions; marriage, for instance, is not a sacred event in Islam but a contract; in the case of inheritance also, individuals can decide as they wish, and no government can force them to follow what the sharia says; they can if they so wish provide privileges to their daughters rather than to their sons. This panelist said that today’s Muslim world is somehow “sick”: It is suffering from despotism, which is a political ailment. This participant also affirmed that the problem is not with clerics: Bin Laden and Mullah Omar (and even Khomeini) are not clerics; they are politicians. Muslim reformers should not miss the real targets—the despotic rulers—and enter into endless theological discussions.

Most of the panelists agreed that religion was not the main issue in democratic reform.
The Role of Religion and Democratic Reform in the Muslim World

One participant disagreed and stated that religion constitutes the core issue in the promotion of any reform. One cannot get away from the fact that religion is fundamental. There have been attempts in the Middle East to revolutionize the concept of society. Nasser and Saddam Hussein tried to do so in their countries to no avail. In the Western world Luther and the Reformation came before Robespierre and the French Revolution. Even the Magna Carta was elaborated in the context of religion. No change can take place if religion is not brought to the center. If there is ever going to be a reformation in the Middle East, reformers should start by understanding religion and by respecting not antagonizing it. There has to be a Martin Luther who can initiate reform. Change comes when someone connected with the culture rises from the inside. One has to start with understanding and respecting Islam and then try to get the Muslim leadership to help highlight positive things within Islam in order to bring change and move forward. Otherwise very little change will take place.

Most panelists objected that there is no real leadership in Islam. There are only different centers vying with one another. In the post-9/11 world, these centers are not able to present a clear condemnation of terrorism. Moreover, in the Muslim world clerics have been co-opted by the governments. Right now there is nobody in the Muslim world who could be considered as a Luther. The Sudanese-American Professor Abdullahi An Naim, who published a book titled Toward an Islamic Reformation some 10 or 15 years ago, is the closest to the likes of Luther. But he had to leave his country where his mentor, Muhammad Taha, was executed by the dictator Nemeiri because he suggested the necessity of reforming the sharia.

It was also said that Luther is not the best example for the Muslim world. Indeed his ideas and acts triggered religious wars and massacres in the Christian world. Moreover, Islam lacks an official clergy. It is enough to grow a beard and don a turban to become a cleric. Militant fundamentalists such as bin Laden and his ilk are politicians. The real problem is political: Muslims have to get rid of their despotic leaders who have continued to rule them in the name of nationalism, socialism, tribalism, and Islamism. The names change, but it is always despotism. This is not a theological confrontation. Rather it is a political one. The message should not be the reform of Islam because the debate about reforming the religion has been going on since the death of Muhammad and the emergence of Sunniism and Shiism and numerous subsects and will certainly go on almost without end. Of course Islam as an existential reality should be subject to continuous critique, as are other aspects of human life. But this is not a theological debate.

It was remarked that some experts, especially in the West, tend to think that Islam is incompatible with democracy. It is true that extremist interpretations of Islam leave scant room for democratic reforms and for changes in the status of women. But the religion should not be confused with its fundamentalist versions used by the so-called Islamists whose movements are more political than religious. There is also a cultural dimension, as, for example, in the issue of wearing
a veil. For instance, many Afghan women consider the burka (the Islamic veil) as cultural rather than religious; they have been used to it for centuries; it is almost a kind of national dress that makes them feel secure. It was said also that the question of the veil or other forms of cover has a “sexual dimension”; indeed to justify this imposition on women, some jurisprudents advance the argument that uncovered women “tempt” men; this affirmation, after all, is denigrating to men because it means that men have no control over their urges and so women should cover up.

**Economic Obstacles and the Role of Women**

All the panelists agreed that economic empowerment is really the key to a change in the situation of women in the Muslim world. Women should be allowed to hold property and to work. In this respect one cannot rely only on local government policies that are often limited by a variety of internal pressures exerted by traditionalists. Direct intervention by Western countries is often counterproductive, for it immediately provokes adverse reactions and gives fodder to the fundamentalists. Applying to foundations and NGOs for resources and access to practical programs is more useful and productive.

It was repeated that a global program of microenterprises and loans of small amounts would greatly help in improving the participation of women in the economic life of their countries. Such programs have been recently introduced in Central America: Loans of 100 dollars to small farmers and other small economic enterprises in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala have produced remarkable results in a short period of time. At the same time women entrepreneurs should be encouraged to pursue a larger scale of enterprise. The value of microcapital will be great in the long run as more women develop social skills and participate more efficiently in their communities.

Some progress has been made, though slowly. Recently there was an economic forum in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in which a prominent Saudi woman spoke to her male counterparts without being completely veiled. She provoked adverse reactions, but the idea of women’s economic capacity was sown. It is true that in Saudi Arabia laws still prevent women from having their own businesses unless a male is involved in the enterprise as a senior partner. There also are numerous constraints that limit women's independence. Nevertheless, more and more women play serious and significant roles in society as architects and medical doctors and not just as social workers and nurses, as they used to.

One of the issues that undergird the economic imbalance of women in Muslim countries is the problem of inheritance. According to the sharia, men inherit twice as much as women. The justification is that men are supposed to provide subsistence for the family. But beyond the endless religious debates on this subject, one should recognize that there is a huge divide among women themselves: Although some have access to education, the banking system, and travel, millions and millions are deprived of education, property, and even the choice of a spouse.

**Signs of Change**

Further reference was made to the fact that union employees at Aramco
elected a woman to the steering committee of the company. This was considered as a benchmark of reform especially in a society that adheres to one of the strictest interpretations of Islam. It was also noted that Saudi women will probably be allowed to vote in the municipal elections scheduled to be held later this year.

In general an ever growing number of Muslim women want to be included in the political and administrative processes of their countries. Nevertheless, they have been discouraged from doing so for a variety of reasons. One argument that is advanced by people who use religion as a shield is that the Koran and the prophet have precluded women from assuming leadership positions. Although many female scholars have disparaged this assertion as untrue, it remains prevalent in the Muslim world.

Nevertheless, since the United States has undertaken to spread democracy in the Middle East, many Arab governments realize that in order to stay around, they have to implement at least a bare minimum of reforms. At the top are women’s rights. It was remarked that the UNDP report on Arab Human Development 2002 shows that women in the Arab world occupy only 3.5 percent of parliamentary seats as compared to 8.4 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa. Obviously women still have a long way to go in the Muslim world. But one can find movement in many countries such as Bahrain, Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco where a new generation of leaders has initiated some democratic reforms. It is important to note that for the first time the question of women’s status is considered as a legitimate topic in a number of Muslim countries. A few years ago nobody would have dared to discuss the problems of women. Now the issue is at the center of almost all debates. Even in Saudi Arabia, one finds a few though still timid openings. Thus some women experts were invited to give advice to the Consultative Assembly created by King Fahd a few years ago. Moreover, in the first human rights conference held recently in Riyadh, a number of women sat with men on a panel, and a young princess submitted a paper—developments that would not have been possible only a year ago. In Morocco a progressive law about women’s equality with men was recently adopted. The same text had been rejected two years before following massive “Islamist” demonstrations against it in 22 cities. But women responded by launching their own mass demonstrations.

Moreover, dialogues and discussions have started and are spreading among NGOs and in academic circles on the subject of the promotion of women’s rights. Recently a writer occupying a high position in the strategic center of the Egyptian daily al-Ahram (which is associated with and funded by the government) said that for too long America and Israel have been used as an excuse for not developing the country and holding women back. Great bravery is needed to say this openly in the Arab world.

It was also reported during the discussions that Arabs defending feminism receive a great number of letters from men; many but not all these men disagree. Thus a Saudi man had an exchange with a woman writer who had published a piece on social relations in Saudi Arabia; she was complaining that even in the limited sphere of women’s rights only women with “connections” were able to enjoy these few rights; the
Saudi man wrote to encourage her to continue to write and blamed Wahhabism for the situation; she wrote back, saying she was not a feminist and would not fight for equality between men and women, for the two are inherently different; this Saudi man answered that she should be proud to call herself a feminist and that he didn’t see major differences except for “maternity leave,” which a woman would need because she actually physically gives birth; so there is at least one Saudi man who wants the women of his country to benefit from the same rights as men. It is important to note that women fighting for their rights have potential allies even in Saudi Arabia.

It was also remarked that for the first time in contemporary history one can find genuine democratic constituencies in many Muslim countries that are on their way toward implementing deep change: Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Turkey, for example; more Muslims in India (than in Arab countries) are living in a democratic system; democratic experiments are going on in Jordan, Bahrain, and to some extent in Kuwait and elsewhere. A tidal wave of change is coming. All possible means should be used to encourage it.

When compared to the situation of only a few years ago, all these developments should be considered good signs. Of course opportunities may close at any moment. Prodemocracy elements in the Muslim world must keep fighting.

The Wahhabi Connection
The enemies of democracy in the Muslim world and in Muslim communities abroad are not disarming. They are becoming more active even in Europe and North America. Most of them spread the Wahhabi kind of strict observance of fundamentalist Islam and intimidate moderate elements in many communities. It was noted that mismanaged “charities” principally funded with public or private or a combination of public and private Saudi money have provided financial resources for the development of political extremist Islam and even terrorist organizations. Working from the top of their political agenda, these paid activists militate against women’s rights. They criticize women working outside their homes or walking without veils or special head coverings. They distribute free fundamentalist literature and try to control mosques not created by their colleagues.

The Complexity of the Muslim World
It was recalled that all Muslim countries are not at the same level of development. Some are much more advanced than others. Democratization, therefore, needs a multilayered strategy. Reformers cannot afford to have one approach. They have to figure out what to do in Pakistan, in Egypt, in Syria, in Iraq, and elsewhere. Almost anything that can be said about Saudi Arabia is inapplicable in most other Arab and Muslim countries. A strategy used for Saudi Arabia might find a receptive terrain in some regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan but not elsewhere, even in fundamentalist regimes. Iran, for instance, 25 years after its Islamic Revolution, seems to be shifting away from its strict Islamic regulations. It has free elections, although the government sifts the candidates through a so-called Council of Experts nominated by
the unelected “supreme leader.” The younger generations express different opinions about the regime openly. They do not hide their preference for democracy. They often criticize the Islamic interpretations rendered by the official clerics associated with the regime.

The problems facing the Muslim world may resemble those of the rest of the third world. But the cultural obstacles to reform in Muslim areas are deeper and need to be dealt with in different ways. Obviously different levels should be considered when one talks about democratic reform and the role of women in the Muslim world. It is important to involve women in mainstream activities of society through empowerment, microloans, and other avenues. It is also important to trigger political reform and mind-set change.

In short, in planning for reforms in the Muslim world, one should duly take into account the complexities of the Muslim world and the different levels of development of each Muslim country.

Education
The panel stressed the paramount importance of education in bringing about necessary changes in the mind-set of people. Without education, it would be almost impossible for democratic principles to find solid and enduring roots in the Muslim world.

The possibility of introducing democratic reforms such as free elections, the right of people to participate in decision making, the promotion of women’s rights, the rule of law, and so forth would remain precarious, as would loosening rigid ways of thinking and looking at the world that have been stalled for centuries. Such a change in mind-sets can happen only through educational reform both at school and university levels. Not only must the curricula be revised, but methods of education must be changed also. Koranic “madrassas” where students learn verses by heart and receive no education other than presentations of the literal meaning of the scriptures are special only to a few Muslim countries. Obviously they are not compatible with the general education that Muslim countries need so badly, and they would not constitute a response to what the authors of the UNDP Report on Human Development 2002 called a knowledge deficit in the Arab world.

The question of school books is directly linked with educational reform. Indeed it is not only how one teaches that is important but what is taught that is foremost. As one panelist remarked, if you intend to teach students stupid things, it would be better not to teach them at all; democratization doesn’t have to wait until all people are educated; it was remarked that British democracy began when 90 percent of the people couldn’t read and write; now there are Arab countries such as Algeria where 80 percent can read and write, but there is no democracy there.

It was also noted that in a limited number of Muslim countries, textbooks are more in line with today’s needs but that a certain number of revisions need to be made even in these textbooks. On the whole, completely new books have to be written and published in most countries. The teaching of science is of paramount importance. It should
be emphasized to Muslims that in America it was within the “New England theocracy” that science began to become a major factor and religion less so. That's how Americans began to progress.

Extending education to girls is important because they in turn will educate their families, producing a multiplier effect in effect. This is something many Muslim men know implicitly, though they are not willing to acknowledge it publicly.

To illustrate one of the practical ways to achieve this goal, the case of a school in a southern province of Egypt was discussed. Girls weren't going to that school because their parents lacked the necessary money. Schools are free in Egypt, but students have to buy their uniforms and textbooks. School authorities went to the families and found that the girls were needed to help at home during certain hours. They changed the school hours so that the girls could attend after they finished helping their parents in the field. They authorized the girls to wear their village costumes to school and made village songs and other folklore a part of the curriculum.

**Revival of Ijtihad**

Related to education is *ijtihad*, a term used in the Koran. It literally means efforts undertaken by individuals to understand and interpret the tenets of the faith in order to improve themselves. Because it did not designate any authority to interpret God's message for the believer, the Koran was open to every Muslim until the “jurists” (clerics) stepped in and made it their preserve of interpretation. This turning point, which happened toward the end of the 11th century, is known in Islam as the “closing of the door of *ijtihad.*” *Ijtihad* was referred to often during the discussions.

One panelist used *ijtihad* in order to understand the faith in depth and to find religious grounds for reform, especially in relation to the treatment of women in Muslim societies. This panelist considered “reopening the doors of *ijtihad*” to be of the utmost importance. This can happen now only in America and Europe where people enjoy the right to think freely, express opinions, challenge, and be challenged. The creation in the West of something like a center for the revival of *ijtihad* would be extremely useful, as it would allow for the funding of some progressive Muslims who could then go out to campuses and make public statements about the need to give Muslim countries an account of all human rights abuses that are committed by their own authorities and push Muslim reformers to take remedial action.

It was stated that in the United States a group of Muslims who call themselves progressives or liberals organize private monthly meetings across the country. They hope that this will eventually lead to a conference of like-minded Muslims and establish a platform of reform that can be exported to their countries of origin. They have concluded that the West in general and United States in particular are the best places where they can debate issues for which they might be killed if they were caught discussing them in some parts of the Muslim world. Many Muslim intellectuals have realized, particularly since 9/11, that the West and America provide space for them to discuss problems they cannot refer to elsewhere. They recognize that
the freedoms they enjoy in North America afford them a lot of opportunities to help Muslims in other parts of the world.

According to some participants, this initiative on the part of a number of “progressive” elements among American Muslims looked like an “underground” movement. The real challenge will be to transform that underground desire for change into an above-ground phenomenon. It is imperative to link this disparate and individualized group of progressive Muslims into some kind of coherent and influential network.

It was recalled that for many years the National Committee on American Foreign Policy has suggested that means be found to mobilize Arab and Muslim intellectuals who live and work in the United States and Europe and help them in planning and promoting endeavors that would help to bring about reforms that would push the Muslim world to join the 21st century.

Soft Power/Strong Power
It was remarked that the problems of the Muslim world, namely, autocratic rule, lack of freedom, and other deprivations, should either be treated or cured. Curing them implies the use of what has been dubbed “hard power.” Those who think that the problems of the Muslim world cannot be cured but only treated lean in favor of “soft power.”

The Europeans, for example, prefer soft power. The use of persuasion rather than force was applied in Bosnia. The Dutch troops who waited while the Serbs massacred Muslims had previously helped Muslims in Srebrenica obtain medical checkups and become well-fed and well-dressed. In the current context, it is said that one can use soft power to open schools in the Muslim world. But what good are schools if there is no freedom? Thus many Arab women are very well-educated, but they are not allowed to do anything. Soft power in such cases amounts to a waste of money. As already indicated, education is important not because of quantity or numbers but because of quality or content.

In the opinion of a number of participants, the use of soft power is not only ineffective but also counterproductive because it tends to enable despotic regimes to escape some of the consequences of their own excesses. For instance, they can create famine. Then, using soft power, Europe and the United States send help that prevents the consequences of famine. The despotic regime stays in power and creates another famine. This has been the case in Ethiopia, which is 40 percent Muslim.

Such a misuse of soft power has also been seen in the Sudan, which is Muslim to the extent of more than 70 percent. There the West, using soft power, buys slaves and frees them. The Sudanese immediately buy more slaves and sell them again. It has become an industry.

Soft power prevents us from addressing the heart of the problem: We live in a world that is endowed with a number of values enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). It is accepted by all the members of the United Nations. The UDHR has been included in the domestic legislation of many, if not all, Muslim countries,
including Saudi Arabia, with some reservations. Such countries that have not done so should be forced to implement their own laws. That can be done by creating a process in which they would be exposed, shamed, and punished or rewarded by an Islamic Human Rights Court like the European one. A woman discriminated against in Saudi Arabia or Yemen would be able to use that court. But that would be reminiscent of hard power. At any rate, the reforms should not be piecemeal. They should be made in the context of a broad strategy that allows Muslims to have a choice in their governments.

Reference was made to the annual human rights reports issued by the State Department. They should be on the table when the president or other officials meet with leaders of other countries. At the international level the same standards apply to the United Nations. If a government wants to be a member of the international community, it has to honor human rights, of which women’s rights are an integral part.

In this regard a recent gang rape that occurred in Pakistan was cited. The victim was punished in order to “wash away” the “dishonor” caused to her family. The only reason the president of Pakistan went to the far-flung village and made sure that the criminals and the police officers that hid them were put on trial was the coverage of this blatant injustice in the international media. Reference was also made to the “stove deaths” of women who were burned alive because their families failed to provide dowries. The United States keeps silent because Pakistan’s president is an ally in the war against terrorism.

These crimes are further illustrations of the inefficiency of soft power. Indeed it was reported that members of a Danish NGO told the survivors of stove burnings that they could go to Copenhagen and have their burns treated free of charge. Another European NGO invented a “machine to cut fingers” in order to replace the practice of cutting off the hands of thieves in some Muslim countries.

### The Use of the Media

The panel discussed the impact and the role of the media in promoting change at several levels in the fields of general information and education. Its members also discussed the use of the media in relation to women’s rights.

It was suggested that women’s organizations wage a media campaign in order to respond to “Islamist” propaganda against their rights as well as human rights in general. They should also develop their own media, for independent media owned and operated by women can yield very positive results. Foundations should help by investing in such independent TV channels. Satellite technology has shown the way and brought Muslim women closer to their Western counterparts. There is a significant flow of ideas. The impact is already visible. For example, women’s magazines in the Arab world are devoting more and more space to general problems rather than to fashion and cosmetics. They carry interviews with businesswomen, woman teachers, writers, intellectuals, and others. Television remains the main instrument, for more Muslim women watch the small screen rather than read printed matter. Their appearance on
TV has transformed a number of women into role models for girls who had never seen women in the public eye.

It was also reported that programs run by women for women are multiplying. For example, a very popular and successful woman’s show is featured on Al Jazeera television. Called *For Women Only*, it is being emulated by other stations. Each week a “hot” woman’s issue is debated by women on the program.

The use of the Internet was also discussed. It may serve to spread education through “Internet Cafes.” The idea of “universities online” was considered. Many sites are already functioning. One of them, called “MuslimsWakeUp.com,” was mentioned as being very effective in supporting democratic reform and change.

The writings of Muslim intellectuals living in North America and Europe should be posted on the Internet. A network could be created for the distribution in different parts of the Muslim world of audiotapes containing such writing.

**What the United States Can and Should Do**

Democratic reforms cannot be imposed from outside. Direct forms of help would be perceived as Western intervention, a kind of neocolonialist or neocolonialist intervention. It is up to Muslims to promote reforms. American Muslim men and women alike can help by creating groups and associations and becoming active. They should address the problems of fellow Muslims in the Arab and Muslim world and make their opinions known through the media. They should also publish articles and books. They should use the Internet to establish dialogue with their peers in their countries of origin.

Unlike U.S. initiatives, which would raise suspicion, action by NGOs and private foundations would be welcomed in the Muslim world. The United States should allow these private sources to become conduits, shaping what they have to offer to the needs of Muslim people. The United States should indirectly help the emerging forces of democratization inside and outside the Muslim world. Funds should be provided for the publication and promotion of books and articles by reform-minded Muslim intellectuals, and consideration should be given to devising specific, better, and more intelligent radio and television programs for the Muslim world.

**Other Conclusions and Recommendations**

It was observed that in many cases in the Muslim world democratic reforms have been imposed by law. It would have been better to develop them in a voluntary way in response to popular demand. Human rights activism should be encouraged especially through the creation of private groups and associations. Such groups have sprung up in some countries but are harassed either by authorities or by fundamentalists. They should be supported by international human rights organizations and by democratic governments.

The “feminization” of terrorist activities by “Islamist jihadi” organizations that use female suicide bombers was mentioned as an example of how the
adversaries of reform turn the values of prodemocrats on their head and use them to their own advantage. It was suggested that an information campaign be launched to counter Islamist propaganda.

Sources of financing used by antireformist extremists should dry up as a result of denunciations of governments, foundations, and individuals that allow money to reach terrorist groups.

It was suggested that women’s organizations no longer stand on the sidelines and seek permission from anybody to attempt the empowerment of women. The experiments started in some countries should be pursued no matter the difficulties and the opposition. The adversaries of diversity, individuality, and pluralism should be denounced and opposed.

Two suggestions were made about promoting women’s rights. The first relates to encouraging a stronger role for women in the democratic reform process. Reference was made to role modeling achieved through extensive cultural and educational connections. The second way relates to providing more significant support for NGOs that deal with the issues of women. One way in which foundations, for instance, can help in this respect is to extend support directly throughout the Muslim world to NGOs related to the empowerment of women at higher political levels.

The panel was reminded that most of the incipient reforms mentioned during the discussions, especially those concerning the status of women, had a kind of “paternalistic” touch, for they were given as “presents” by leaders. Tactical retreats by such leaders are always possible. The multiplication of women’s civic associations throughout the Muslim world is of the utmost importance. It was remarked that such associations exist in several countries. More of them are needed in all Muslim nations.

It was suggested that special human rights watch groups, modeled on those that exist in other regions of the world, be created for Muslim countries.
Notes

2. A whirl of creativity and progress characterized the first three centuries of the Muslim Empire. Then, toward the end of the 11th century in the East and the end of the 12th century in the West, it came to a stop. The causes are numerous, but the common denominator is the triumph of fundamentalist interpretations of the religion.

3. The forced, rapid “modernization” in Iran put in jeopardy the authority of the Shiite ayatollahs. It also challenged the authority of “fathers” both at social-political levels and in individual families. Hence Khomeini’s appeal to the masses. Saudi Arabia, with its puritanical Wahhabi brand of Islam, was exposed to societal change after the first Persian Gulf War (as exemplified by a group of women who tried to drive their own cars). The talk of reform by King Fahd, as well as the presence of American troops on the soil of the “two sacred mosques” (Mecca and Medina), prompted bin Laden to create Al Qaeda.


5. The Koran encourages Muslims to practice ijtihad, which means individual study and interpretation of the tenets of the faith. In the first centuries of the empire, the jurisprudents used ijtihad as a principle of jurisprudence. Clerics later “closed the doors of ijtihad.” These “doors” remain closed.

6. See Summary of the Roundtable on Reform and Human Development in the Muslim World held on March 20, 2003, by the National Committee on American Foreign Policy, 6-7.

Afghanistan and Iraq are related to the roundtable discussions. For the first time both countries have an opportunity to experiment with democratization. Broadly speaking, the United States is pursuing well-thought-out strategies but implementing them in the wrong place. Policies that would be good in Iraq are applied in Afghanistan and vice versa. For instance, federalism is both relevant and desirable in Afghanistan but not in Iraq. Paradoxically the United States is encouraging that system of government in Iraq, not in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan emerged as a state in the 18th century as a loose confederation of different ethnic groups (Pashtuns who are about 38 percent of the population, Tajiks who are 32 percent, Uzbeks, and several other smaller groups). Though it would be natural to promote a federal state there, the United States is trying to impose a very strong central government. Iraq, on the other hand, was created by the British after World War I as a centralized government based on an army. Because it has two important resources, water and oil, that require central management, it was given a unified structure. Paradoxically the United States seems favorable to establishing a federation there.

Another problem stems from the fact that the United States engages in a lot of military show in Iraq. Sending its troops on daily patrols makes them an easy target. Such displays are not necessary because the insecure areas are a very small part of the country. In contrast, such patrols are needed in Afghanistan because of the activities of numerous war lords. Moreover, the United States needs to secure Iraq’s frontiers because they are used for infiltration by Iran, Syria, and other countries.

A further mistake that the United States has made relates to the imposition of its “friend” Karzai in Afghanistan. Karzai has no constituency. In Iraq, the United States should have appointed its friends as members of the transitional government.

In the same vein, the economic policies that the United States has recommended for both countries should be reversed. Afghanistan cannot become a welfare state because it is a very poor country and has no resources to commit to creating social and health services. The central government can hardly pay its civil servants. Nevertheless, the United States has encouraged the implementation of this policy.

Iraq, on the other hand, could be one of the richest countries in the world. It is sitting on 12 percent of the world’s oil reserves. Moreover, it has reached the peak of the production it achieved before the first Gulf war and can continue the tradition of the welfare state that was created under the Baath party. Iraqis are used to a lot of subsidies, free education, free health care, and the like. Nevertheless, the United States is advising total privatization and abandonment.
of the welfare state there.

A question that touches directly on the subject discussed by the roundtable is how to empower women. There is much more opportunity for gender equality in Iraq than in Afghanistan. Many Iraqi women have acquired good educations and work experience because the country has been at war practically since the mid-1970s. Since the males were at the front, the women did the jobs previously done by men in all sectors of the economy. A program of empowering women in Iraq would be easily implemented because it would be realistic and based on facts.

Conversely, in Afghanistan, even in the best of times, say, under Zahir Shah, before the Communists took over, women were kept at home if not absolutely under the veil. They were not given educational opportunities. Now women and their supporters want to do a lot of things for women. But there are very few women who can perform. This situation has nothing to do with fear of the religious establishment.

Yet another comparison of the two countries concerns the role that Islam will be authorized to play in the future democratic states of Afghanistan and Iraq. A majority in both countries (99 percent in Afghanistan, 95 percent in Iraq) are Muslims. Most citizens want Islam to be identified as the religion of their state even though they don’t want Islam to be the sole source of legislation, a view that has been expressed in both draft constitutions.

But here again there is a big difference. Iraqi leaders are trying to set up a committee consisting of five mullahs to decide whether laws voted by parliament should or should not be Islamic. This is obviously very dangerous. In Afghanistan, Islam is misperceived as rather superficial because part of the territory was Islamized only in the 18th century. Most of the people are illiterate and therefore have no access to the Koran. They are vaguely Muslim: Even the Taliban thought that Islam meant such things as going to the bazaar or measuring the length of men’s beards. Those misperceptions stemmed from ignorance of the religion. In Iraq, on the other hand, there is a very well-developed tradition that has always kept clerics out of politics. They were satisfied to have their own space. But the opposite is happening now.

In the economic field, the United States is leaning heavily on Iraqi politicians to adopt a free-market policy and prepare for membership in the World Trade Organization. Iraq is not ready for that kind of opening to the world. Indeed if state assets are privatized in Iraq, the buyers will be the remnants of the Baath party who are flush because they looted the treasury and emptied the central bank. Moreover, politicians own hotels, banks, insurance companies, and other enterprises. What is needed for democracy in Iraq is not a separation of mosque and state; it is a separation of business and politics.
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