The Future of Democracy in the Middle East:
Keynote Address
University Scholars Day 2006

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Bio:

Dr. Emile Sahliyeh received his Ph.D. from Georgetown University. In 1987, he joined the Department of Political Science at the University of North Texas. Since 1999, he has been the Director of the International Studies Major at the University of North Texas. He received several prestigious fellowships including the RAND Corporation Fellowship, Fulbright Senior Scholar Research Fellowship, Ford Foundation Scholarship, Brookings Institution Fellowship, and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Fellowship for International Security Studies. His research focuses on religious resurgence and ethnic protest in the Middle East, Palestinian politics and leadership, issues of war and peace in the Middle East, and the status of democracy and human rights in the Middle East. In addition to more than 30 articles and chapters, he is the author and editor of The PLO after the Lebanon War in Search of Leadership: West Bank Politics since 1967, and Religious Resurgence and Politics in the Contemporary World. Finally, Dr. Sahliyeh lectures widely in the United States and the Middle East and is frequently consulted about Middle Eastern politics by the American media and the U.S. government.
Abstract:

This speech addresses the issue of democratization in the Middle East. Professor Sahliyeh discusses major reasons for the lack of democratization to date; namely, expansion of powers of the state due to (1) lack of development of the bourgeoisie and a private sector economy, (2) the development of an extensive military infrastructure, (3) the influence of oil wealth, (4) the patriarchal and authoritarian political culture, (5) the role of Islam, (6) the lack of civil society institutions, and (7) the influence of external political powers. In this context, he examines the impact of the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, and discusses feasible possibilities for increasing democracy in the Middle East, including (1) increasing powers of the parliaments, (2) giving the judiciary branch more independence, (3) increasing civil society institutions, and (4) increasing individual freedoms in the liberal democratic tradition.
Introduction

I want to thank my colleague Dr. Gloria Cox for her kind introduction. Also, I want to thank Dr. Susan Eve, colleagues, and of course, above all our distinguished young scholars for inviting me to attend your conference. I’m deeply honored and pleased to be your speaker today.

I was browsing the list of topics and papers that you are presenting today and it is extremely impressive. It speaks very highly of you, of your achievements, of your dedication, and the refined research that you are engaged in. I want to congratulate you for the scholarly work that you are involved in. I want you to know that we are very proud of you and very confident that you are going to make a difference in the life of our country.

At the same time, I want to also thank on your behalf, and on behalf of our university, Dr. Cox. Believe me, if it were not for her dedication you wouldn’t have an Honors College or this wonderful program. She started it from nothing and look where it is right now. And of course Dr. Cox is very fortunate to have the support of Dr. Eve. So please give them a big hand for the wonderful college that they are leading.

My modest contribution to your conference today is a few remarks about a topic that is on our national agenda. Since 9/11, you have heard the Bush administration talking time and time again about the need to spread democracy and freedom throughout the world and especially in the Middle East in order to contain “the forces of darkness and terrorism.”

Democratization in the Middle East

Two decades ago or so, a wave of democratization was ushered in different parts of the world: in Latin America, Europe, Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, Africa, and Asia. And the Middle East was not an exception to the democratization movement. We witnessed parliamentary elections taking place in several countries like Yemen, Jordan, Morocco, Egypt,
Tunisia. However, by the mid-1990s many of these democratic reforms were retracted, and with the exception of Israel, Cyprus, Turkey, and Lebanon where democracy has been consolidated, there is a serious deficit of democracy in the Middle East. The question is why is that the case? Why is the Middle East an exceptional region of the world?

I would like to explore with you the findings of Table 1, which I extracted and modified from an article that I published a couple of years ago. This table shows you a regional comparison of regime types in the Middle East and different regions of the world. When you examine the table, you will find that between 1970 and 2000, only 9% of these countries can be categorized as democratic regimes. Compare that to the rest of the regions of the world. You will observe that the Middle East is the least democratic among the regions of the world between 1970 and 2000.

The table also reveals the status of oligarchic regimes or the rule of the few. By comparison to other regions of the world, the Middle East has more than 66% of the countries as oligarchic regimes between 1970 and 2000. The table also reveals the status of autocracy or authoritarianism. It shows that the Middle East is a little bit behind Africa at 25% to 29%. But if you add the countries that were oligarchic and autocratic you get 91% of the countries that can be categorized as non-democratic authoritarian regimes between 1970 and 2000. And this is by far higher than any other region of the world.

And of course the question that comes to mind is why is that the case? How do we explain it? There is a vast body of literature that deals with this issue. I would like to summarize for you some of these explanatory perspectives that account for the democratic deficit in the Middle East.

Reasons for Lack of Democratization in the Middle East:
Expansion of the Power of the State

One of the explanations in the literature for the democratic deficit in the Middle East is the expansion of the powers of the state. However, one may argue that the expansion of the power of the Middle Eastern state is not unique, as it is part of a universal phenomenon in the twentieth century where we observe an expansion in the role of the state in the West, under Communism, and among third-world countries. Indeed, as a result of decolonization, we find many Middle East regimes undertaking the task of nation building, including industrialization, economic development, spreading education, health and social services, and owning large industrial enterprises. As a result, the state created the huge bureaucratic apparatus.

*Lack of Development of the Bourgeois Class and Private Sector*

This expansion in the power of the state came at the expense of the bourgeoisie class and the private sector. Moderate and radical Middle Eastern governments did not trust the bourgeoisie class or the market forces to engage in economic development. Indeed, the bourgeoisie class was distrusted by the moderate pro-Western governments on the grounds that this class has immediate interest, namely profit-making, and therefore it cannot be trusted with the task of economic development. That is why they justified the state’s engagement in economic activities. Likewise, the socialists and revolutionary governments distrusted the private sector completely and thought of it as a tool in the hands of neocolonialism. The end result is the suppression of the bourgeoisie class, confiscation of its assets and the nationalization of its property. For many of the revolutionary leaders in the Middle East, independence and freedom meant freedom from colonialism but not economic freedom or freedom for the individual.

*Development of Military Infrastructure*
This brings me to the second factor that accounts for the expansion of the power of the Middle East states. Many of those governments adopted defensive modernization. By this I mean the states created huge military infrastructures and armies and internal security apparatus. The justification for this military buildup was to contain neocolonialism and imperialism and to keep the West and the United States out of the region. The need to build these huge military forces was also necessitated by interstate wars, including the Arab/Israeli wars, Iraq/Iran wars, as well as the civil wars and internal violence including the ethnic and religious conflict in Iraq, the Algerian civil war, and the ethnic cleansing that has been taken place in Southern Sudan. All of these factors provided the regimes with the justification to expand their armies.

Table 2 shows the amount of resources that the governments in the Middle East allocate for the military. For instance, out of the total Middle East imports, 5.5% of these total imports are devoted to military equipment. By comparison to Latin America, Asia, and Eastern Europe, the Middle East appropriates more of its imports to the military than these regions. Likewise, the Middle East governments allocate annually a higher percentage of their budget and their annual GNP to the military than the other regions of the world. Moreover, in the Middle East, the military personnel make up a higher percentage of the labor force than other areas of the world. The net result is that the Middle East governments have access to vast military forces, which were used as means of oppression of dissident movements like what happened in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and in the Sudan.

*The Curse of Oil*

In addition to these two factors, there is the curse of oil as an impediment to democratization in the Middle East. The governments of the Middle East over the last 50 plus years have won over their people by doling out huge economic rewards and social services rather
than expanding the circle of participatory politics. Certainly the availability of vast external rents in terms of oil revenues, significant foreign assistance from the United States and the Soviet Union, Western Europe, as well as income from tourism, and external borrowing, enable these governments to render an array of services to the people at low or no cost. In the West, the governments collect taxes from the people to be able to offer such services. With the exception of Israel, taxes in the Middle East are the lowest in the world on income, capital gains, and profits. There have not been compelling reasons for Middle Eastern governments to tax their people because they have plenty of external rents. In return for providing for the social needs of the people, the governments expected loyalty and non-involvement in politics.

When the price of oil goes up significantly, as is the case in 2006, the governments have a lot of resources at their disposal to dole out social and economic benefits. I would like to point out that the time when these governments allowed for political liberalization was in the mid-1980s. That is the time when the price of oil plummeted and reached $7 a barrel. During this time, the governments could not continue to dispense such services and that’s why they were forced to liberalize. By the mid-1990s, the price of oil went up, giving the states more resources and many of the democratic reforms were retracted. Based upon this analysis, the future of democracy in the Middle East today is not too promising in view of the fact that the price of oil vacillates between $50 and $70 a barrel.

Political Culture

A fourth perspective that is used to explain the weakness of democratization in the Middle East is the political culture. This is a very controversial topic and has several facets. Some scholars who use the political culture to explain the persistence of Middle Eastern autocracy attribute such a phenomenon to the patriarchal and authoritarian nature of the Middle
Eastern family. They argue that the family is based upon the patriarchal values in which sons, daughters, wife, or wives give almost absolute obedience and reverence to the father figure. That kind of a family structure does not promote inquisitiveness, freedom of thought, or independence. President Sadat of Egypt or King Hussein of Jordan would refer to themselves as the father figure of the Jordanian family and the father of the Egyptian family. What is the implication of that? As a father, your sons and daughters are expected to obey you. The proponents of this perspective conclude that the cause of democratization will not be served by the pervasiveness of such attitudes.

The Role of Islam

Other scholars attribute the weakness of democracy in the Middle East to the role of Islam. On the one hand, there is a vast amount of literature that argues that Islam is supportive of democracy. There is also a counter-scholarship that Islam promotes authoritarianism. Here, there are writers who point to certain aspects of Islam that do not favor democracy. In particular, they point out that in Islam there is no separation between religion and politics, that Muslims are supposed to be guided by the Holy Book and the divine will, and that in Islam sovereignty lies in God and not in the people. This means that the ruler as well as the ruled are accountable to God.

This conception of Islam does not give room for questioning the ruler or promoting governmental public accountability. Such writers further contend that Islam places more importance upon the community, argues that the state has a collective responsibility to the community, and that the individual is simply a member of the larger community; as such the individual has obligations toward the Islamic community. This conception is at the expense of the rights of the individual because the community is the one that matters, not the individual. Finally, unlike Christianity, where the church offered a model for resistance to the empire or the
emperor, in Islam there is no organized clergy. And that is why imams, and especially in the Sunni Islam, came to be dependent upon the state, and as such, they became defenders of the status quo. Of course, the cumulative effect of all of these arguments is the reinforcement of the authoritarian tendencies.

*Lack of Civil Society Institutions*

Another explanatory perspective that is crucial for the consolidation of democracy is the presence of civil society institutions. This concept refers to political parties, interest groups, women’s associations, labor unions, and professional associations. Though some of these groups exist in the Middle East, they have to be licensed by the Ministry of the Interior. And you bet the Ministry of the Interior will not issue a license for any party if it is against the government. In addition, many of these informal, civil society institutions promote personalistic interest or private interest. Nowadays you hear a lot about Iraq and the fragmentation in Iraq and how tribal loyalty is limiting the establishment of such civil societies.

*The Influence of External Powers*

Finally, I want to talk about the external powers and inquire about their role in contributing to the promotion of democracy in the Middle East. The two colonial powers, Britain and France, did not promote democracy in the Middle East, nor did they come to the Middle East with a Bill of Rights in their hands. On the contrary, both colonial powers suppressed popular movements that were formed to resist colonialism, and they installed feudal, oligarchic regimes in parts of the Middle East such as the royal family in Jordan and in Iraq before 1958.

The two colonial powers were succeeded by the bitter Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States. Between 1945 and 1990, our primary interests in the Middle East were not human rights, democracy, or popular participation. Our primary concern was national
security interest, access to oil, and containing the Soviet Union. As a result, we ignored the issues of human rights.

The Impact of 9/11

Then comes, of course, 9/11 in 2001. And we woke up all of a sudden, realizing that we ignored what has been happening at the mass level. In the absence of liberal movements and free elections, the Islamic movement offered the only viable political opposition to these dictatorial regimes. At the same time, it was difficult for these regimes to crack down on the Islamic groups as they did with the local Communist parties and Leftist labor unions.

Since 9/11, our government has consistently talked about the need to promote democracy in the Middle East. How do you bring this about? What is the United States doing to promote democracy in Egypt for instance, where President Mubarak has been in office since 1981? Egypt gets large amounts of annual foreign aid from the United States and we should have made the continuation of this aid contingent upon serious and genuine democratic reforms and opening of the political system. Some argue that our occupation of Iraq is motivated by our desire to promote democracy in the Middle East. The truth of the matter, however, is that when we did not find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, we presented the war in Iraq as bringing freedom and democracy to the Middle East. And if you are a Middle Eastern citizen and you look at what is happening in Iraq, do you want that kind of democracy? I am afraid that the answer is in the negative. Nobody wants that kind of anarchy and instability.

Conclusion

So that brings me to the end of my comments. I don’t want, however, to leave you with a pessimistic conclusion. What can be done? Is there a way out? Of course, when we think of democracy, what first comes to our mind is electoral democracy, where citizens would vote
through fair and free elections to change their government. Are we in the United States ready to insist upon free and fair elections throughout the Middle East at a time that we are engaged in the war on terrorism? The answer I am afraid is in the negative. This explains why we have this love relationship with the president of Pakistan who came to power as a result of a military coup. And our ties to him remind me a lot of our relationship with the Shah of Iran.

*Increase Parliamentary Powers*

There are other aspects of democracy that we could promote. Democracy is not only about elections. Elections, after all, can be rigged. Many of the presidents in the Middle East conduct elections every now and then and they win the elections by more than 90% of the votes. So why don’t we try to be more creative and think of other aspects of democracy? Take for instance the institutional aspects of democracy. Here, we may urge our allies in the Middle East to give the parliament more powers. Advocating such a political change does not threaten the viability of these governments.

*Independent Judiciary*

Another aspect of democracy is the separation of powers and checks and balances. In this connection, we should urge our allies in the Middle East to grant the judicial branch its independence. We should insist upon that.

*Increase in Civil Society Institutions*

Another aspect of democracy that we could focus upon is pluralist democracy where we should encourage the establishment of various civil society institutions and give direct assistance to non-governmental organizations that promote human rights, interest groups, and women rights.

*Increase Individual Freedoms*
Finally, we also should try to emphasize the liberal aspect of democracy and focus on securing rights for the individual including freedom of the press, freedom of expression and association, and freedom from state oppression, and police arbitrary arrest of innocent citizens. International pressures can bring about such desirable democratic outcomes in the Middle East. I believe that the democratic reforms in Turkey nowadays are a constructive example. As you know, Turkey is trying to join the European Union. The European Union furnished Turkey with all types of standards and rules and regulations that the Turkish government has to comply with before its admission to the European Community. This explains why hundreds and hundreds of Turkish policemen are studying in the United States, Britain, France, and Germany in order to learn about the rule of law. These are the kinds of positive steps that we could do without trying to overthrow regimes, as what we are doing in Iraq, which is, as I stated before, is not a shining example of democracy and stability.

I want to thank you for listening to me and giving me the opportunity to share some of my views on the future of democracy in the Middle East. I want to also congratulate you for the exciting research that you have been engaged in. I am confident that you are going to do well in your lives.
Table 1. Procedural Democracy: Mass Accommodation and Elite Accord: The Middle East and Regional Comparisons, 1995

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Central and Latin America</th>
<th>Africa</th>
<th>Middle East</th>
<th>Asia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Elite consensus with High Mass participation (Democracy)</td>
<td>53.6%</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>31.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Elite consensus with Low Mass participation (Oligarchy)</td>
<td>25.6%</td>
<td>50.9%</td>
<td>65.8%</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Elite consensus with Low Mass participation (Autocracy)</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
<td>25.1%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Elite consensus with High Mass participation (Stratarchy)</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
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</tbody>
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Table 2. Military Spending of Middle East Compared to Other Regions of the World, 1995

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regional Comparison</th>
<th>Arms Imports (% of total imports)</th>
<th>Military expenditure (% of central government expenditure)</th>
<th>Military expenditure (% of GNP)</th>
<th>Military personnel (% of total labor force)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Asia (exclude China)</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asia</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Europe</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
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