**Lebanon-Palestine-Egypt -
Regional Struggles for Freedom,
Dignity and Independence**

By Rami G. Khouri

I’d like to share with you some thoughts concerning what I think may be happening in the region. I use the title ‘Egypt, Palestine, and Lebanon’ because I think that the three countries are quite similar to each other in many ways and that significant things are happening there that possibly reflect the emergence of a new trend in the region. There is a tendency now to respond to the definitions that come out of the United States. The United States, of course, is very powerful. It not only sends its army to enforce regime change, rebuild countries, and change systems, but the American discourse and the American Government’s spin doctoring from the White House sets the intellectual and political agenda for many people around the world. The Bush Administration is trying to promote the idea that America has a forward strategy for freedom and democracy and is changing the region by driving an Arab spring of freedom and democracy, and I think it’s important for us to analyze very carefully, accurately, and dispassionately what in fact is going on in the region and to look closely at the role of the external actors – whether it’s the United States, the Europeans, the UN or others – in order to come up with some kind of consensus about what is really going on.

So, are we experiencing a great spring of Arab freedom and democracy? Is it driven primarily by foreign pressure? Is it driven specifically by the American policy of regime change in Iraq? Are the American-engineered elections in Afghanistan and Iraq the beginning of a process that is promoting sentiments for democratic change and a quest for freedom in other Arab countries, or is this purely a homegrown process? Are there things happening in the Middle East and abroad that converge with each other? I think it is very important for us intellectually, politically, and analytically to really understand this better. This is about the only area really where I think the Arab World is on an even playing field with the United States and the West in terms of analysis and news and views. The realm of ideas is the only realm right now where, in the public sphere, the Arabs are able to compete with the US, Europe, Israel, and others around the world. In terms of propaganda and the influence of the media, we don’t have the same power, but in terms of generating ideas and analyzing the situation, I do think we have an ability to do that. I would like, therefore, to give you a view from within the region about some of these trends and issues.

Let me start first with Lebanon and Syria. I’ll make my initial point clear. What is happening in the Arab World – symbolized by Egypt, Palestine, and Lebanon - for very different reasons and under very different circumstances, is a common quest for freedom, dignity, liberty, democracy, and even self-determination, one that is happening in all these countries and in other countries around the world. We’re seeing the early stages of it in some cases and the more advanced stages of it in others. I think there is a locally driven indigenous movement of people, citizens, and political activists, an indigenous movement for freedom, democracy, and change, and I think that this is coinciding with and actually being used by external pressures. The pressure from the United States, of course, is the most dramatic, but the Europeans, Canadians, UN institutions, and others are also active in this same arena trying to push forward some of these processes. Some of them are common and some of them are different, but I think that in the final analysis, we are actually faced with an opportunity that we have not had before, certainly not in my lifetime, and possibly, not in modern history. I’m talking here about the opportunity to begin identifying a middle ground, a common set of values or goals that Arabs, Americans, and Europeans can converge on as well as a set of ideas and goals that we can try to implement together. We’ve never had an intellectual or a political common ground where American values, self-interest, and national interest converge with Arab, Islamic, or Middle Eastern values and goals and this may be an area that fulfills those criteria, though whether this actually happens will depend on how we act politically and in other ways, both in this region and in the West.

What has happened in Lebanon since last June is a very important and even historic process, one that I have followed very closely since my office is just three blocks from Martyr’s Square in central Beirut. Martyr’s Square is where Hariri is buried and near to where he was killed, and it is also where all of the big demonstrations were happening, so I would go there twice a day to see what was happening. The very real Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon – the United Nations has certified that the army and intelligence people have all left - happened relatively quickly, and, in retrospect, relatively easily, to everyone’s surprise. The Syrians probably have some people in Lebanon who are still trying to influence the country, which is normal, but I do believe there has been a full Syrian withdrawal and an elimination of Syrian control over Lebanese politics. The reason for this, I would argue, is that the withdrawal was demanded by a unique convergence of domestic Lebanese pressures against the Syrians (most Lebanese wanted the Syrians to leave and to stop controlling the country) with very explicit and even widely seen to be legitimate international pressure, particularly through UN Resolution 1559, which was crafted and co-sponsored by the Americans and the Europeans together and passed through the UN with Security Council approval. There was also a third component, which, in the final analysis, was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Saudi Arabia and Egypt told the Syrians that they couldn’t help them and that they had to withdraw. When the major Arab powers, the indigenous Lebanese, and the major Western powers all demanded that the Syrians leave, the Syrians understood that they had no other alternatives and withdrew. Not only that, but, in addition, the Syrian Government sent a letter to the UN Secretary General saying that Syria had left Lebanon in compliance with UN Resolution 1559 and out of respect for UN resolutions. Syria was basically telling the international community that the pressure from the UN Security Council was seen to be legitimate, and so Syria adhered to it. Of course, Syria did this partly to relieve the pressure and partly to try to score points by showing that, because it had accepted all UN resolutions, all UN resolutions should be implemented in return that call on Israel to withdraw from the Golan and other Arab territories.

The withdrawal, then, happened quickly and fairly easily. The more complicated issues, however, arise in trying to determine what will happen next in Lebanon and Syria, and, more importantly, what this represents in terms of potential consequences or implications for the wider Arab World. Are the events that took place in Lebanon unique to Lebanon? Is the political dynamic that we’ve seen in Lebanon – the massive popular expression of sentiment and of political will – something that is being mirrored in other places? Will the current Lebanese experience influence people in the same way that, for instance, the successful Lebanese resistance against Israel in southern Lebanon clearly influenced and spurred the Palestinians to resist the Israelis? Is the Lebanese people’s peaceful, public demonstration of the desire to be free of Syrian dominance something that will have an impact in other Arab countries? Is there a parallel process going on in other Arab countries? I think there may be.

I think that what we are seeing in Lebanon is a process that will become much more complex, nuanced, and possibly erratic. Over the last year, there has been a clear, linear process of people in Lebanon speaking out against the Syrian dominance of Lebanon. It started last June when the Syrians started hinting that they were going to extend the presidency of Emile Lahoud, which triggered the beginning of movements of resistance and opposition. It was quite an unprecedented situation, with political leaders – the Maronite patriarch, Walid Jumblatt and others – speaking out publicly and challenging the Syrian move to extend the term of the Lebanese president. The significant thing that I believe will have an impact on the region is not that they spoke out against Syria, although that’s significant to an extent, but the fact that they publicly challenged the security and intelligence services and the police services of Syria and Lebanon. This was a very dangerous thing to do, and also an unprecedented and significant move: to publicly challenge the security dominance of political systems in the Arab World.

The process gained speed with the extension of Lahoud’s term in early September. It was also at that time that the US, France, and others went to the Security Council for Resolution 1559. The Syrians and the Lebanese Government (then still under Syria’s control) responded by becoming more defiant. In the end, however, their defiance was unsuccessful because the assassination attempt against Marwan Hamadi in October generated even more anger and further public challenges of the security services. This was followed by the Hariri murder. We still don’t know who committed the murder, and the international investigative committee may or may not find out, but what is important is not so much who did it, but rather its impact and consequences. After the murder, a spontaneous explosion of public sentiment against the Syrians and against the Lebanese Government of Emile Lahoud (and, later, Karami) erupted. The various opposition groups came together very quickly – the Maronites, the Druze, the Sunnis, some Shi’ites, and a large number of independents – and they formed a very strong and very public political response. At the street level, they organized huge demonstrations. They began with the Hezbollah demonstration - which was very large, orderly, and well organized, and very impressive - of somewhere between three- and four-hundred thousand people. The following week, on 14 March, approximately a million people joined together in an extraordinary demonstration in the middle of Beirut. It was incredibly powerful, for several reasons. Firstly, it was very peaceful and orderly. Secondly, everybody was waving the Lebanese flag. Third, there was a clear set of political demands that the opposition had drafted after Hariri’s murder, which they then articulated very clearly: they wanted a Syrian withdrawal, the resignation of the Karami Government and the seven Lebanese security and judicial chiefs, a parliamentary election to take place on time in late May, and an independent international investigation of the Hariri murder. It took around three to four months, but all five of those demands have now actually been met, which is really quite impressive, and again, it was because the pressure in Lebanon regionally and internationally was irresistible.

Was what happened in Lebanon just a demonstration of anger against the Syrian presence and Syrian dominance, or was it something more? I would venture to say that what the process we have witnessed in Lebanon might be the first example of an Arab citizenry practicing national self-determination. It may be the first example of an entire citizenry, or the vast majority of people, defining its own political contours, its quality of governance, its internal national identity, and its relationship to regional powers (whether it’s Syria or Israel or whoever else) through street demonstrations and a sense of unified national identity. It may be the first example that we have in modern Arab history where an entire citizenry, through a confrontational process with its political elites, has succeeded in establishing a specific set of demands. This may be the best example, and it may be the only example that we have, of an Arab citizenry that may be able to define for itself its own fundamental concepts of nationhood, statehood, and governance ideology. The history of the modern Arab World is one in which most of the governance systems were either imposed by the European colonial powers as they were leaving, or, as happened in places such as Saudi Arabia and Yemen, by indigenous small elites that did not set up governance systems or configure their national political identity according to the widely, popularly expressed will of the citizens. We’ve never had the majority of people in an Arab country define their own nation, politics, identity, relations and values, so this is a tremendously exciting possibility, if it is indeed happening. It’s not clear yet, but I believe that, emotionally and politically, this is the best opportunity we have to see an Arab country doing this.

The issues that have to be dealt with now are obviously much more difficult. In a way, what has been achieved in Lebanon has been easy: to get the Syrians out, to investigate the murder, to change the government, and to hold the elections. It’s all been achieved because the demands were so strong and compelling, but now, the issues become tougher. What do you do about implementing the Ta’if Accords? What do you do about readjusting the sectarian system? Do you have a secular system? Do you have a confessional system? What’s the role of religion and secular parties? We’ve already begun to see over the past month an intense debate emerge about the electoral system and the different electoral districts, and this still has to be resolved. We’ve also seen the system revert to a traditional system of tribal or ethnic leaders becoming political elites. Most people are quite critical of this. I don’t think, however, that this is such a bad thing. I think the Lebanese have been through so much, so many traumatic experiences, that they need a kind of pause or some kind of return to normalcy.

You have to remember that the Lebanese have been through two traumatic experiences to which they have not yet had a chance to reply, namely, the Lebanese civil war, and then right after that, the Syrian domination of their country. I think it’s important to note that most Lebanese are grateful to the Syrians for what they did initially, meaning, for playing a positive role in stopping the civil war and allowing the country to stabilize and rebuild, though the majority of Lebanese also feel that the Syrians should have left the country about ten years ago, that they really overstayed. They also feel that the Syrian dominance of the Lebanese economic and political system was too heavy-handed and that Syria had too much control. It’s because of this that the Lebanese were indignant and it’s because of this that, to a certain extent, they felt degraded, because they were not in control of their own destiny, and the major decisions about their own internal and foreign policies were being made in Damascus. That is one of the reasons the opposition movements were so explosive.

We’re now faced with larger issues. The elections that are coming up will probably go smoothly, and the opposition groups will probably win a small majority. The opposition has already divided again, having failed to agree on unified slates, so there could very well be some surprises. Michael Aoun is back, and Samir Geagea might be released from jail any day now. The system is changing, and all the players are adjusting to new realities. Hezbollah, for example, has to make some adjustments, the Maronite Church may play a new role, the Hariri bloc, the *Mustaqbal*, the ‘Future movement,’ are being tested in terms of what kind of power they’ll have. There are many new, unknown factors. Will Walid Jumblatt be able to play a dominant national role or will he go back to being a tribal leader of the Druze? It’s still unclear how these issues will be resolved, especially now that the French, Americans and, to some extent, the UN have become significant external players in Lebanon, having taken over from the Syrians – whose level of influence is still unclear - and the Israelis.

There’s another important factor that I think is going to be significant, though it is still too early to analyze, namely, the approximately two million Lebanese, or about half the population, who were demonstrating for one reason or another out in the streets. That’s an enormous popular expression of a certain sentiment, the sentiment being to get the Syrians out, to investigate the murder, the list of issues I mentioned. That’s very clear. What’s not clear is whether this massive popular uprising will have other dimensions. Are these people, especially the younger people, asking for something else? It’s important to recognize that the majority of Lebanese today (meaning about 70 percent of the population) who are, say, under the age of 30, have only known life under the civil war and the Syrian domination. They’ve not lived in an independent and sovereign country, but they now have the chance to do that. What do they want? Do they want economic, political, and educational reform? Do they want a secular system? Do they want less religious and confessional power in the system? Do they want a more open democracy? These are big issues to which the answers are not yet clear. How this massive public sentiment manifests itself, whether it remains as one unified sentiment, will have a large impact on what happens next.

The linkages with Palestine and Egypt are important because you now have the same thing going on simultaneously in Lebanon, Palestine, and Egypt, that is, a generational response to an entire generation of subjugation or dominance. In Palestine, it’s the occupation of Israel, obviously, but also the dominance of a traditional political elite (here characterized by Arafat, the Fateh leadership, and the dominant majority that governs society). In Egypt, it’s the Sadat-Mubarak political leadership, and, particularly, Mubarak, who has been in power for 24 years. People in Egypt are now saying that this is “*kifaya*,” “enough.” In Lebanon, it was a full generation, or 25 to 30 years, of Syrian domination. In all three cases, after a generation of the political system and the economic system being dominated either by external powers (like the Israelis or the Syrians in Lebanon), or an indigenous political elite (in Palestine and Egypt), an entire generation is expressing its desire for change. It may be expressing more than that, it may be expressing a desire for substantial national reform and reconfiguration. It’s not clear yet, but I think that what we’re seeing in these three countries is the manifestation of a very powerful completely indigenous human and political force that has absolutely nothing to do with the United States, the Barcelona process, or any external force. What you’re seeing is, I would argue, a human loss of fear and a human determination to struggle for one’s own rights within one’s own country. There is a new willingness to confront and challenge the mechanisms of control of the powerful, established political, economic, and military/security elites, even at the risk of losing one’s own life.

The Palestinians, of course, pioneered all this with the *Intifada* – the first *Intifada*, which was generally peaceful, and the second *Intifada,* which included the use of more military resistance against the Israelis. In Egypt and in Lebanon you had different expressions. In Egypt, the movement is much smaller, but I think it’s very significant because the public challenge of the ruling National Democratic Party and the Mubarak Government (which is essentially the military and the NDP elite basically ruling the country) is almost as significant as somebody like Jumblatt or the Maronite Church publicly challenging the Syrians in Lebanon. Here in Palestine, when some people challenged Arafat and Fateh or people challenge the Israelis, it is considered a serious act of defiance and a serious act of resistance by people who risk their lives. I think the common denominator is one that reflects a loss of fear; people are no longer afraid of challenging the powers that dominate them and they insist on living a better life characterized by greater freedom, dignity, and better governance. In this respect, I think, the closest parallel we have to these movements in the Arab World is that with the American Civil Rights movement and the movement for freedom from Apartheid in South Africa. These two models, but especially the American Civil Rights movement from the 1950s and 60s, are the closest parallels we have in terms of trying to understand the sentiment and the human emotions that push people to confront these powerful forces and systems that dominate their lives. People were willing to risk their lives, were willing to be killed or imprisoned because they were no longer willing to continue living as they did under the conditions of dominance, subjugation, denial, or occupation. I think that is the common human element that we see going on in these countries. You also see signs of it in places like Bahrain, with the liberal movement challenging the regime there. They don’t want to overthrow it, but are rather challenging it to give people equal rights, to stop denying the rights of majorities or to stop subjugating minorities.

Furthermore, I think these common elements are captured most dramatically and symbolically through language. For example, in Lebanon, when people began going out into the streets, they repeatedly called their resistance “*Intifadat Al-Istiqlal*,” or the “Independence *Intifada*.” In the US, they try to call it the “Cedar Revolution,” which is nonsense. Nobody has ever used the words “Cedar Revolution” in Lebanon. Except for CNN and some foreign correspondents, people say “*Intifadat Al-Istiqlal.”*The fact that they use the word *“Intifada*” is a very powerful symbol of the common sentiment with the Palestinian *Intifada*, and the fact that they also use the word “*kifaya*” (which is written all over Lebanon), the word that the Egyptians use, is a sign of allegiance with similar movements in Egypt. Therefore, a very clear common vocabulary represents a common sentiment among people.

Those are the main points that I wanted to make. I would like, however, to make two last points. The first is that this is an ongoing process and there is no way to tell how this is going to proceed. My guess is that, in the short term, the Lebanese system will go back to its old ways: the elections will be held using the old election law, the traditional leaders will mostly win though there will be some new winners, the opposition will do pretty well and they might have a small majority. I think people are happy to go back to a sense of normalcy for a while. They now have to establish a new parliament and a new government, and then they’ll probably challenge the presidency of Lahoud since he’s mostly seen as illegitimate because of the Syrian extension of his term. What’s going on in Lebanon in the short term is a re-legitimization of a political governance system that is seen to have been de-legitimized by 30 years of Syrian dominance. That’s the short-term process. The longer-term process may be the Lebanese people collectively undergoing a process of national self-determination, the aim of which is to liberate and then define themselves. They have the Ta’if Accord agreement as a nice framework upon which everybody agrees, yet it raises big issues - the role of Hezbollah, the confessional balance – all of which still have to be dealt with.

The second is also an ongoing process: the Egyptian movement. This movement is just beginning, and I think it’s going to gain steam. The fact that the judges in Egypt came out a few weeks ago and demanded to have a greater role in monitoring the election is profoundly important. The judicial system in Egypt has always been one of the most credible institutions in Egypt – it’s a homegrown institution, it has a lot of credibility, and it represents the rule of law. It’s about the most powerful example you can find of a citizenry saying that it wants the rule of law and doesn’t want dominance by small elites that are unaccountable and self-perpetuating. That process is moving ahead. The Egyptian Government has responded in minimal ways. It said, for example, that it would allow other candidates to run for president. It’s not a serious liberalization, but the fact that the government responded at all is an indication of how serious the pressure is.

In Palestine, of course, this is again an ongoing process. You have a very complex situation here where you have people trying to simultaneously challenge the Israeli occupation and build up their society internally. This means challenging the Israeli plans to cantonize Palestine, as well as Israeli pressures that want to slowly drive out Palestinians while, at the same time, building societal infrastructure at the municipal level, at the national level, and reforming security agencies and government institutions in order to have a more democratic system.

All of these, therefore, are ongoing processes whose potential for success is still unclear. What is important to examine at this stage is the nature of the sentiment driving these popular movements. I think that sentiment is the will of subjugated and oppressed people to resist their oppression, to break their chains, to defy their occupiers, to challenge their oppressors, to demand a better life, and, largely, to do it peacefully.

The second and last point I would like to touch on is the role of the United States as an external pressure in the events I’ve been describing. I think this is the most fascinating, the most difficult, and, potentially, the most important factor in the short to medium term, meaning, the next two to three years. What is the appropriate role, if any, for external pressure on Arab societies and Arab regimes to change, to democratize, and to reform? Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Palestine are all examples where the US and others are pushing for change. Iran and Syria, though, are the two most important and dramatic examples of external, and especially American, pressure. Again, it’s important to be accurate and nuanced in the analysis of the Lebanese situation, and we need to stay away from emotionalism so as to be as accurate, clear, and as precise as possible.

When we talk of external pressure, we tend to say in general, “There’s external pressure, the Americans are pushing us to change.” I think if you look at the external pressure that took place with the Syrians getting out of Lebanon, it was actually quite varied and there were several different factors. It began with the American-Syrian Accountability and Lebanon Sovereignty Restoration Act that was passed about a year and a half ago. The American Congress passed this act to pressure the Syrians and in order to establish limited sanctions, but, because the move was purely unilateral, it was not seen as legitimate. The Americans were basically telling Syria what to do. The American army then overthrew the Iraqi regime, which created another kind of external pressure. You can be sure that the Arab leaders today, in everything they do, are very aware of the fact that there are 135,000 American troops next door and that they’re wondering if they will be coming after them next. That, of course, is another form of pressure. Resolution 1559 was then passed. This was fascinating because, unlike the American congressional resolution, it was the US, France, and Germany together, through the UN Security Council, and it was seen to be legitimate by most people (except the Syrians and some Lebanese). The Egyptian and Saudi Arabian governments then told the Syrians that they had to get out. That was yet another form of external pressure on Syria, but it came from within the Arab World. Finally, the European Union – with its new neighborhood policy replacing the old Barcelona and eastward expansion enlargement policies – put a positive form of external pressure. This external pressure has to be seen in light of what the European Union has done with Turkey in the last seven or eight years, which has been a very profound example of positive external inducements that help countries in this region evolve in a good way. Therefore, when we talk about external pressure, it’s not just George Bush, Condoleezza Rice, and Donald Rumsfeld with his army, but rather a nuanced series of pressures that are economic, political, military, bi-lateral, multi-lateral, negative, and positive and I think we’re going to see more of that in the future.

The point I would end with is that we need to examine closely whether the push for democracy and freedom is an area where Europe, North America, the Arab World and others can work together legitimately according to rules that we draw up together for goals that we define together in order to bring about the kinds of changes that would respond to our rights and demands for freedom, liberty, democracy, reform, and prosperity while at the same time coinciding with what Europe and North America define as their national interests. The reality is that democracy, freedom, reform, stability, security, and prosperity have now become the focal points of two powerful forces that up until now have been opposed to each other: one is the force of popular Arab sentiment and the other is American national security.

Since 9/11, Americans have come to believe that Arab reform, defined by them as reform towards ‘freedom and democracy,’ is critical to their national security. This may or may not be correct, it may or may not be fair, but that’s how they see it. We, meanwhile, believe that Arab freedom, reform, and democracy are critical in terms of our rights as human beings to the point where people have stood up and said that they are prepared to die to live in freedom. Is there a possibility for these two powerful forces to converge? It is still unclear, but I don’t believe we should rule it out. I think we should not make the mistakes either of the 1920s or the 1990s. That is to say, the post-World War I decolonization process by Europe in the Middle East during the 1920s – creating Arab countries, imposing their systems and borders, choosing presidencies, parliaments and institutions – has not worked very well. Neither has the modern system of the 1990s and beyond where the West, particularly the US, has come to the Arab World saying that it wants to help it become free and democratic as well as to establish human rights and Western values. At a theoretical level, it should be in the Arab interest to be free, democratic, and egalitarian, but most people in the Arab World have rejected the American offer, saying that they don’t want to have anything to do with the United States on this issue. The Europeans have also done this in a low-key and inconsistent manner, but they haven’t gotten very far. Is there a chance now to connect these interests without making the mistakes of both the West’s predatory imposition of its values only according to national interest and Arab rejection of any Western proposals that might possibly converge with our interests because of deep resentment and anger over American policies in Iraq, Palestine, and elsewhere? Is there a possibility to rethink this now, chart a better course, one that is mutually productive and seen to be legitimate in the eyes of everybody? It’s a little Utopian, it’s a little romantic, and I raise it as a question that deserves a serious discussion. In the final analysis, the answer will come, as it should, from the consent of the governed and the will of the majority in this region. Thank you.

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***DISCUSSION***

AUDIENCE MEMBER: You commented on the issue of a citizens’ movement towards nation- or state-building, which is very important for people like us working in civil society’s organizations and trying to see where this fits in. What I see to be really missing in your account is the religious dimension. When you spoke about two million people demonstrating in the heart of Beirut, who moved them? Who brought people? Who mobilized people? What is the agenda? They were definitely far-sighted in not taking anything but the Lebanese flag and focusing on just being a citizen. In the movement of the people, though, there were Maronites, Shiites and Sunnis, all societal components existing just below the surface, yet, on the surface, we just see the Lebanese demonstrating. We see exactly the same thing in Egypt, the two components, the Muslim Brotherhood and the secular activists in civil society like Sa’ad Eddin Ibrahim and the NGOs. I don’t see you being fair to the whole religious question, or even to the question of who is hijacking religion, how, and to what effect. It’s the same thing with political parties moving the citizenry. You don’t address me as a Palestinian citizen without looking carefully at my political affiliation. Am I a member of Hamas or another political party?

With regard to your third point about the US, I think that the Americans are sending an alarming message that did not come only from the invasion of Iraq, which is just an American military presence.

KHOURI: I didn’t mention the religious dimension because I feel that in the final analysis, this is not about religion, but rather, about citizenship and nationhood or statehood. I think that in order to answer this, we need to look at the wider history of religion and politics in recent years. Again, the Civil Rights movement and the African anti-apartheid movements are very powerful examples because these movements were often led by the churches – for example, Bishop Tutu and Martin Luther King, Abernathy and the Southern Baptist Church. These were religiously led movements in many cases, and people met and organized in churches, sang hymns and so on. It had a very powerful religious dimension to it, but, in the end, it was not a religious movement, it was a movement for civil, individual, and national rights. My analysis of what is going on in the Arab World is that it is parallel to that. People will return to their religion for absolutely natural and good reasons when they have no other means of expression or resistance open to them, when the means of engaging in political or national struggle are not available to them, or when their governments in Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine and elsewhere don’t let them engage in political transformation. God becomes their last resort. This is the role of religion: religion is a force that gives you hope where otherwise you have only hopelessness. It can give you a sense that the world will be better and that there’s a reason for your suffering. It also can be a tremendous mobilizing force. All over the Islamic World, and all over the Arab World, religion is a very powerful mobilizing force because it is authentic and genuine, just as it was among some of the Christian movements in the West.

I personally see the role of religion as a transitional process that is completely natural, and I think we should expect it and not resist it. If the religious-led groups are the only ones that can challenge the oppressive old order and force it to change, they should be given a chance to do so, as long as they play by the rules upon which everybody agrees.

This is the big debate now. In Lebanon, for instance, there is a fascinating debate about Hezbollah. Will it get more seats in parliament? Is it going to be more active? Will it be disarmed? The Americans and the British are now holding quiet, indirect talks with Hamas and Hezbollah and the Muslim Brotherhood, and I think that the world is finally acknowledging that we can’t tell each other who should rule. The only thing that we can tell each other is to agree on the rules of the game. If there’s a democratic process and Islamist groups win, as they did in Turkey, they must be given a chance to govern as long as they play by the rules. There’s a risk, of course, and some people are terrified by this. They worry that if Islamists take power, then they’ll establish a state like Iran, an Islamic dictatorial government. My own sense, though, is that the sentiments that people are expressing are predominantly political and national sentiments, but they are expressed in and mobilized through a religious vocabulary. That is, I think, a completely logical role for religion. If you look at the civil rights movement in South Africa again, after people’s rights were achieved, more or less, the religious people went back to church. You might say that Islam is different from Christianity, and it is, but I believe that Hezbollah is about both ‘*hezb’ and* ‘*Allah*,’ it’s more a political movement, a national movement, a social movement than a purely religious movement.

Where was the Islamist movement in Palestine 40 years ago? It was always there, of course, and there were always elements, but it’s not what it is today. Why are these Islamist movements so strong? Why did the Islamists overthrow the Shah? I think for the same reasons. After a generation or two, people became hopeless and turned to God, and, if the religious movement failed to get them out of their hopeless situation, some then turned to death, suicide bombings, killing and destruction because their lives no longer had any meaning. This is a lively debate, and who knows how it’s going to turn out, but that’s my own interpretation. I think we should expect a religious dimension in the governance system and we shouldn’t necessarily rule it out, like what happened in Algeria. I think religious sentiments are very powerful. You cannot just throw them out the window and say, sorry, you cannot govern. I think now is the time to engage each other in defining the rules.

There is a great irony now in this convergence of American and Arab interests. We just don’t know if the Americans are serious (and this is your other question). People are skeptical because American motives are questionable. The Americans could, for example, just create another Star Wars, set up their own wall around their country and defend themselves from the world, then they wouldn’t have to worry about what happens in the Middle East because it would no longer be a threat and they would become indifferent to tyrannies or terrorist states here (that is, as long as they don’t feel threatened). They might change their mind after a while and forget about their freedom drive. Still, why not assume that they are serious and give them the benefit of the doubt? Call their bluff. If they are serious about promoting freedom and democracy, the great irony, which might actually be an opportunity, is that they would agree with the other strongest advocate for democratic, free elections, the Arab people. They both believe in the necessity of establishing democratic, stable, and free Arab states. It’s possible. Again, I pose this as a great challenge that we need to analyze and respond to more productively than we have in the past.

I think that the US war in Iraq had an impact on the minds of certain Arab leaders. Bashar Al-Assad, Husni Mubarak, the Saudis, the Jordanians, and others all think about Iraq more than we do, wondering if the American presence there is possibly an example that might be repeated in other places. They’re certainly pressuring the Syrians and the Iranians. The Americans will not venture into another war, but in the final analysis, if they needed to use military pressure because they were desperate, they probably would. Now, whether the American move in Iraq is sensible and productive, only history will be able to determine. I don’t think it is. I think it’s the wrong approach. I think containment, promoting democracy and containing tyranny, would be a much better approach. I think the United States and Europe should have worked together with people in the Arab World. It would have probably taken longer, but we’ll never know because, after 9/11, the US went nuts and it couldn’t wait. It sent the army and it made two and a half regime changes in Afghanistan, Iraq, and in the Palestinian Territories. It’s continuing to do so in Iran, Syria, and now in Egypt to some extent. So we’ll never know. It’s a theoretical argument.

The fact is that you now have a war between the United States (and a few other countries) and movements that are targeting the US, which are predominantly Islamic. The Americans say that these are people who want to destroy Western civilization, but I don’t believe that. There are some individuals and some Islamist movements that speak about changing the world, but the majority of Muslims don’t want that, as far as I can tell, and are perfectly happy to live in their own societies as Palestinians, Jordanians, Egyptians, or whatever. They just want to be treated like human beings. They want to be able to practice their religion. They want to be able to express themselves if they want to express themselves in religious terms without being banned, put in jail or demonized. They don’t want to be lied to. They don’t want to be subjected to generations of poverty and marginalization. The demands that most people have in the Islamic World are demands that coincide with both their Islamic values and their rights as citizens in modern states. If they’re not allowed to express themselves or bring about changes to their political, civil, and human rights through the institutions of statehood and citizenship, they will do it through the language of religion and justice. This is a very personal thing that different people interpret in different ways. I tend to take a low-key view about the Islamist issue. I don’t see it as a great threat. I understand why people turn to their religion. I understand why Islamist movements are growing. I personally don’t see them as a massive threat in the long term. In fact, I seem them as movements that go up and down, but if you press them, they’re going to get stronger. That’s not just true about Islamist movements, but about any kind of nationalist movement or movement for political rights.

Religion is an unbelievably powerful tool, and we’re seeing it exercised. I think Iran is the best example of what happens when people try to use religion as a means of governing a modern country. I don’t think religions are designed to govern states. I think religions are designed to give you values that define society and how people live and relate to one another. I think that’s a very appropriate role for religion. If you look around the world, there are very few, if any, religious states because statehood and religion don’t often converge. Where have Islamists had power in our generation, over the last 30 years? Iran and to some extent Sudan and Pakistan, it was just a colossal failure. Their own people have even fought them. Turkey is the best example of a slow transition to modernity while maintaining an Islamic identity. I think it’s great that the Turkish Prime Minister’s wife wears a headscarf and they don’t serve alcohol at receptions and that the Turks have found a good balance between religious, personal, and human identity on the one hand and the rights of citizenship in the country on the other. The principles that are important to maintain are the rule of the majority, the protection of minority rights, and the consent of the governed. These are fundamental principles that correspond to Islamic values as well as the values of modern constitutional republican statehood. That’s how I see it. Maybe I’m a bit romantic and idealistic, but that’s my perception.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I was wondering if you could say a little bit more about the Palestinian question and the occupation. As you know, Israelis are occupying Palestinian lands and have stripped the Palestinian people of their homes. In addition, there is an occupied part of Syria and, before, of Lebanon. The main problems here, I think, for so many of our people, are very much due to Israeli occupation, so we must think about how to end the Israeli occupation and return the refugees to their homes and lands and then maybe think about the need to practice democracy amongst our own people in the future. The US didn’t come to this area to build democracy; it came to control the oil wells and the area more generally, so I think it’s better to look first at ending the occupation.

KHOURI: I think there is a point that I didn’t mention because of time, but I think it’s important to try to understand what the real motives of the Americans, the French, and the Europeans are. Why did they go to the UN? Why did the Americans start pressuring Syria a year and a half ago? I think that’s a very important issue. The Americans don’t care much about Lebanese freedom or democracy. If they did, where were they five or ten years ago? The Syrians have been there for 30 years. Obviously, the Americans started this whole policy of promoting freedom and democracy after 9/11. I don’t think oil is a major issue, personally, but that’s a big debate. America’s two main concerns, I think, are terror and the interests of Israel. The United States has not been addressing the issue of terror and 9/11 very well and I think that it’s increasing the terror threat rather than decreasing it. The US insists, however, that the major focus is terror and trying to deal with the issues and the environments that create it. The second concern, the interests of Israel, is one of the reasons, for example, that the Americans are almost exclusively and very heavily pressuring Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas. The French are not pressuring. The French and the American interests diverge quite a bit and they converge only with regard to getting the Syrians out of Lebanon, investigating Hariri’s murder, and having free elections. On other issues, though, the French have told the Americans to forget about disarming Hezbollah and to leave that to the Lebanese. Now the Americans seem to be pulling back and leaving the Hezbollah issue to the Lebanese. The US is pushing Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas because these are seen to be threats to Israel. It’s pushing them for another reason too, I think, which is more intangible and difficult to pin down: these are the last four countries or groups in the region, maybe in the entire world, excluding North Korea, who defy and challenge the United States. They do this only at the rhetorical level, and none of them are going to attack the United States or hurt Americans. I mean, Hezbollah may have been involved when American troops were in Lebanon, but that’s still debated. Americans accuse Hezbollah of terrorism partly because of the attacks against the American and French troops in 1983, and that’s also still debated. Hezbollah says that the people who did it had nothing to do with the group, but who knows? The reality is that these are not four groups or countries that are threatening the US, although they *do* defy it. The United States has trouble handling that, and I think it goes back to the post-Cold War transition and the US deciding that it needs to set the rules for the world. The United States is not very good at colonialism. It hasn’t done it very much, and it doesn’t know how to rule other people. Every time it sends its army outside – other than for World War II, which people see as a legitimate use of American force – it gets into a big mess.

I agree, therefore, that the motives are not legitimate, and clearly, Israel is a big part of this agenda. Israel, weapons of mass destruction, all of these things, in Washington’s eyes, these are all part of the war against terror. The democracy promotion issue – the US policy of promoting democracy – is not very credible right now because its motives are suspect and it’s erratic. I mean, if the Americans really want to promote democracy, they don’t have to go and spend US$300 billion to fight a war in Iraq, killing thousands of people. They can work in Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, and other Arab countries where they can promote democracy without all of the killing and violence. The issue of Libya is a very good example. I mean, Libya gave up its weapons of mass destruction and the Americans haven’t done anything else to try to promote democracy there, and Libya is still run more or less as a police state, so yes, there’s a big problem with the US. Whether it’s a question of wanting to control the oil or not, who knows? History will tell. I don’t think so myself. I don’t think you can control the international oil market very well. I think it’s a free-market run system. Some people say that they want to be in Iraq mainly to send a message to Saudi Arabia. Maybe, but we’ll have to see.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I would like to make some comments about the US influencing the development of democracy in the Arab World. I agree, of course, that the American interest in democracy in the Middle East is probably defective, although it might have given the Arabs some sense of security and encouraged them to speak up by giving them a sense that dictatorships no longer have American support. The other important fact, which you didn’t touch upon, though, is the communication revolution. For example, in Palestine, the prevalence of satellite receivers is about 78 percent and, Palestinians, for the most part, are not watching state-controlled TV. I’ve done a recent survey on media (television channels, newspapers, radio stations, and so on), and satellite channels are taking over, especially Al-Jazeera. Al-Jazeera has the highest rating followed distantly by Arabiya. These two channels are very powerful now in controlling and shaping Arab public opinion. In Jordan, I think, the prevalence of satellite TV is about 45-50 percent. I don’t know about Egypt, but in Lebanon, it’s probably around 60 percent or so. The groups that are controlling these tools can really influence the value system in the Middle East, and it was just a matter of time before people started organizing themselves around issues presented by these satellite channels, which are basically bombarding the Arab World with their own different, non-state-controlled views. This offers a big push towards democratic transition in the Arab World, but only time will tell how people will interact with these satellite channels coming from different sources.

The other thing I would like to comment on is the Islamic groups and their role in the democratic transition. The Islamic groups are really powerful and they become more powerful in poverty-stricken areas. The problem with Islamic groups is that they themselves claim to have a problem with democracy. In Palestine, for example, we hear democracy denounced in the Friday prayer speeches, that Muslims don’t want democracy and that it’s a bad system. Clearly, then, the Islamic groups have to make a serious decision about whether they will play by the rules of the game. Whether they’re willing to do that or not, this is still an open question and it’s really scary sometimes as it doesn’t appear as if they’re seriously committed to playing by the rules of the game. They might go into elections one year, but later say that they will boycott them unless they’re in control. They rule by Islamic Law and that’s it. What’s more, Islamic groups have historically helped the Arab regimes in de-legitimizing progressive groups that were calling for democracy. They cooperated with security forces that were trying to oppress all of the progressive groups while they concentrated on social oppression, claiming progressives and proponents of democracy were *kufar* and that they should be ignored. This was a serious problem historically. Islamic groups, therefore, have to make serious decisions about how to proceed in the Arab World in general.

KHOURI: I agree, and I think we’re watching this debate now; it’s very active. I don’t think an Islamist group can take power in a democratic election and then stop the democratic process. I think the popular reaction would be too powerful. The Islamists understand that if they win through a legitimate election, they need to maintain their legitimacy through the system itself. We’ll have to see.

On the satellite TV front, I think one of the most powerful factors was the Ukrainian revolution. That was very powerful in Lebanon. It had a huge impact on the Lebanese, and they imitated it – they wore the scarves and they had the bands in the street – to the point that when Hassan Nasrallah, the head of Hezbollah, mentioned the Ukraine in the speech he made at a massive rally, he said, “We are not the Ukraine.” It was fantastic. Nasrallah felt that he had to make it clear that Lebanon was not the Ukraine. It turned out in the end, however, that maybe it was like the Ukraine, but it’s hard to tell. We don’t know where the Lebanese transition is going to lead to in the end, and we’ll have to wait and see, but the impact, I think, of seeing what happened in the Ukraine was very powerful, and I think the Lebanese and the Palestinian situations also impacted on Egypt. I think we’re going to see more of this: people in the Arab World influencing each other in this process.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: You were talking mostly first of all about Lebanon and how everything went there. What about the Palestinians in the refugee camps that are living in poverty and waiting for a revolution? They’re not allowed to come back here and they have nothing there in Lebanon; their children can’t even go to the right schools. Another thing about the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, it was really the US that denounced the Syrians and pressured them to get out, that’s why the Syrians got out. The other thing is why they were there in the first place: the *Harb Al-Ahl* and the intense fighting between the Shi’ites, the Sunnis, and the Muslims. That’s why the Syrians were put there in the first place, to my knowledge. Another thing is that the 9/11 attacks actually just made the Islamic religion very, very popular, as a result of which many people converted to Islam. I watched a lot of news about this.

With regard to the US, the United States is the most powerful country right now and it wants to stay that way, which is why everything now is like a game to the Americans, like checkers. Right now, with the war in Israel and Palestine, I don’t see anything happening, and I don’t think anything ever will happen to this country.

Moving on to religion, in Iran, because there’s just one religion, it sets the rules for one’s life, how to live it, and the values that you talked about, one result of which is that Iran has very few internal problems and the country’s only real problem is that other countries don’t like it. In Palestine, however, as well as the neighboring countries, there’s a problem of being either too religious or too Western or Americanized. The media is not helping. The Palestinian channel with all due respect is not very good. It shows debates with two guys talking about some sort of issue, but they don’t really discuss issues that are challenging to the youth, to the children who are the future of our country.

KHOURI: You had many different points. The Palestinian camps in Lebanon are some of the most awful places in the world in terms of living conditions. It’s really one of the great modern crimes, moral crimes, in the Arab World, how these people live, but they’re not a factor in Lebanon. Since the civil war, the camps really have been isolated from the rest of society. There are huge problems in the camps and terrible injustices, but just in terms of analyzing what their role or situation is, they really are not an issue right now. The only time the camps are mentioned is when the Lebanese want to scare each other and say, well, this is a plot to settle the Palestinians permanently in Lebanon, or, the camps are places where terrorists are hiding their guns or something like that. So, the refugees are used like boogiemen to scare people. It’s a very difficult situation.

You say the Syrians got out because the US pressured them. Well, US pressure is a big factor, and you cannot completely ignore it. The Americans are like big gorillas running around the world, and they’re very strong. They’re using their power. War for pre-emptive regime change is not an American threat, it is now an American legacy. They’ve done this now twice and they’ll do it again, and it’s a real problem. The projection of American power around the world is a major problem for most of the world, and there’s been a massive backlash against the US in the last eight to ten years, partly because of that.

I’ll just say something about Iran. The majority of Iranians – I haven’t been to Iran, but I talk to a lot of Iranians and read a lot about what’s happening in their country - are not happy with their present system. They’re good Muslims, but they don’t like their police state government. They have a government that’s autocratic and not democratic, and most Iranians have voted three times now in the last seven years to have a more liberal, more democratic system. There is a huge challenge, then, to find the appropriate balance for the people of this region – the appropriate balance between religious values and identity and political governance. It’s a challenge that nobody has resolved, and the Turks are the closest to trying to find a good balance that works. Now you have other Muslim societies like Malaysia or Indonesia, but they don’t claim to be Islamists and they don’t imitate Iran. They’re good Muslims, their values define them, but they keep religion relatively separate from governance. In this region, the link between governance and Islamist groups is potentially much stronger. It’s a challenge, then, and I think that what we’re dealing with partly is the accumulated pressure and distortions of the modern state system in this region with the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Cold War, the oil boom, and all of the other problems of the last 50 to 60 years. These problems have led us to a point where we have societies with intense pressures, terrible distortions, corruption, violence, militarism, and autocracy, and people are finally beginning to fight back. I don’t see any difference between us and South America, Africa, Asia or Europe. In the end, we all want the same rights, we all have the same abilities, we all have the same reasons to want to live in democratic states, and we can define them: we want them to be a little bit religious, a little bit secular, we want to have one big Arab country, or we want separate little cantons, little countries. We should be able to decide all of that. There hasn’t been an opportunity for any Arab citizen, any Arab population, to define itself. It’s the terrible fact of modern history. That’s where I sense that these movements, these sentiments, these forces, waves, maybe, in the region, are possibly something new and historic.