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Panel 3: Europe and the Middle East-Policy imperatives for the next decade
Presentation: Strategies for Democratization in the Middle East

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What is this thing that we're talking about today? And, how can I say something new and insightful, without boring you, especially in light of the torrents of writings and, often dogmatic, proclamations about the subject?

In my attempt to engage you at the end of the day, I am relying in my presentation on two very helpful sources:

1. A brief article, written in 2004, by Basil Fernando from Sri Lanka who is a member of the Board of Directors of the Asian Human Rights Commission, titled, "*Democratization: Transitions and conflicts in Asia and the Pacific*" (www.ahrchk.net); and
2. A booklet, written and published in Arabic in 1995, by Halim Barakat, an Arab sociologist, titled, *Democracy and Social Justice: Towards enriching the Arab Experience*, (Ramallah: Muwatin).

What emerges from these, and from many other similar writings, is that we cannot discuss the process of "democratization" without addressing a whole cluster of issues directly related to this process, sometimes constituting preconditions for its success, and at other times, necessary for enhancing the presence of a conducive and incubating environment. These issues include, *inter alia*, the role of society and its interest in initiating the process, the perceived objective, the specific history, localized culture, presence of a viable civil society, national identity, empowerment versus powerlessness, colonialism, occupation, foreign intervention versus sovereignty, globalization and controlled distribution of wealth, poverty, popular participation and diffusion of decision-making, formal democracy (electioneering) versus genuine change, gender-based differences and inequality, accountability of decision-takers and makers, individual and collective human rights, etc.

Certainly, I shall not discuss all of these issues; otherwise, we have to camp here much beyond this session! I will, however, "pick and choose" to highlight the complexity of applying this process, and to allude to the disingenuous concern of

Western powers – Europe and the US, in supporting the strengthening of this process.

Beyond this, and for contrasting purposes, I re-examined a long “policy paper”, titled “*Democracy and Human Development in the Broader Middle East: A Strategy for Transatlantic Partnership*,” which was presented at a conference held in Istanbul on the eve of the NATO summit in June 2004, and which was produced by a 19-member working group composed of Europeans and Americans drawn together by the German Marshall Fund of the United States, and which was distilled in an article published in *The Washington Quarterly*, Spring 2005, by Ronald D. Asmus, the executive director of the Transatlantic Center of the German Marshall Fund of the United States in Brussels, Larry Diamond and Michael McFaul, who are senior fellows at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, and Mark Leonard, the director of foreign policy studies at the Centre for European Reform in London.

I am bringing this “policy paper” in this context, purposefully, in order to show the strategies that, definitely, I am not advocating for the Middle East. First, let’s go back to affirming basic elements of what is “democratization” and how it can work, at the risk of being dubbed “simplistic”, “idealist”, or worse yet “naïve”!

At the level of Conceptualization

1. Genuine democratization is a process that people enter into to create a state for their own benefit. It is a self-generated initiative where people must see direct benefits to themselves, as individuals, and to their society and living environment, as a collectivity. Unless they perceive it as a vehicle for genuine change, and a qualitative step towards the actual amelioration of their situation, they will not enter into it voluntarily. From this perspective, “formal democracy” (elections) should not necessarily be equated with democratization; it could camouflage another form of authoritarianism and/or tyranny.
2. People may be ready to initiate democratization in a moment of power, where they exercise genuine sovereignty, which imbue them with the capacity to control and use their natural resources and other sources of wealth for their own benefit. Un-empowered people, with rampant feelings of powerlessness and alienation, who are colonized and occupied as a result of foreign intervention, do not embark on self-generated democratization.

3. Genuine democratization involves everybody; it engages all social groups in the society. Thus, democratization cannot result from a process where colonial rulers (either directly, or indirectly through their national agents) play an important role in the transfer of power between elites, albeit through an electioneering process. Social equality has to be at the heart of genuine democratization.
4. To be sustained, then, such a genuine democratization process requires adherence to the notion of the rule of law, backed by and anchored in institutions that enforce it, and safeguarded by a vibrant civil society that monitors the responsiveness of these institutions, and holds them accountable. Democratization requires that formal (state) institutions be held responsible through a constitutional framework that incorporates international norms and standards set out by UN's human rights treaties and covenants.
5. The process of globalization distorts the equal distribution of wealth, and exacerbates the gaps between those categories of the population that, more and more, acquire absolute control over resources, and those that are, more and more, deprived of access to resources. The process of globalization is increasing class and power disparities to the disadvantage of most of the people who are becoming poor and poorer. Therefore, globalization is threatening genuine democratization, and circumventing local societies from taking initiatives towards democratizing themselves. Globalization is based on domination, not democratization.
6. Following from the above, it makes no sense to characterize groups within society as constituting "pro-democracy" or "anti-democracy" forces, since no one in the society would be opposed to a process of genuine democratization; on the other hand, however, many would be, and ought to be, opposed to a process of globalized imperialism and foreign domination, which is premised on keeping them poor, marginalized, and unfree.

The Arab World (including the Occupied Palestinian Territory)

In the context of genuine democratization, the Arab World today may be characterized by the following dismal trends:

- Increasing poverty,
- Disparity in the equation of just distribution of resources and wealth, and widening of the gap between those who have access and those who don't,

which legitimizes and politicizes a cultural reinforcement of the widening gap between the two classes,

- Widening of the scope of foreign domination,
- Direct foreign military occupation,
- Corruption of ruling elite classes, and the absence of mechanisms of public accountability,
- Misuse of public funds and resources,
- Increase of the hegemony of the state and its institutions over civil society and its institutions,
- A rampant sense of alienation and powerlessness of the individual,
- A disappearance of the notion of the public good,
- And camouflaging all of the above in an envelope of “formal democracy”, i.e. regular elections.

Strategies for democratization?

The “policy paper” to which I referred earlier, advocates the following approach, through the use of political, economic and military incentives (read: coercion):

A transatlantic strategy to promote democracy and human development in the broader Middle East must be based on three pillars. First, it must aim to help strengthen the forces for democratic change and stable liberal democratic politics within these societies. Second, such a strategy must also work to create a more secure regional foreign policy context that can facilitate democratic transformation. Third, the United States and Europe need to organize themselves across the Atlantic and with partners in the region to sustain these policies effectively for a generation or more (The Washington Quarterly, 28:2, p.8).

I am opposed to this type of externally-motivated approach of intervention, whose objective is to increase foreign domination and hegemony in our region, and over our people. This is the type of approach that allows foreign powers to dictate, for example, what kind of school curricula we should have for our future generations, and how to modify, or alter our history and cultural values to make them more palatable to our occupiers.

If we (you and us) are serious about supporting the initiation of a process leading to “genuine democratization”, I propose three main strategies:

- 1. Work to ensure that people acquire genuine sovereignty, by exerting efforts to end foreign domination and hegemony, and direct military and economic occupation.**

2. **Assist in the serious empowerment process of people, by alleviating poverty, and by enhancing the presence of a viable civil society institutions and actors.**
3. **Work to strengthen basic “anchoring” institutions (esp., the judiciary), which are required for the success of sustaining genuine democratization.**

If we can get back for a moment to Palestine, one has to pose the question “why hasn’t this been done by Europe and the U.S since 1994?” In 1999, a Task Force Report on “Strengthening Palestinian Public Institutions”, which was sponsored by the American Council on Foreign Relations, was published. The Report asserted that:

A primary goal of the Palestinian Authority, and its partners and counterparts in Israel and the international community, should therefore be to achieve good governance, based on the following:

- *A constitutional government;*
- *Political accountability and judicial review;*
- *The transparent and accountable management of public resources;*
- *The rule of law and citizens’ rights;*
- *Democratic participatory politics and pluralist civil society; and*
- *An effective and responsive public administration.*

Why haven’t these “partners and counterparts and the international community” done much about it nearly ten years later? In reality, the question should be posed differently: why have these “partners and counterparts and the international community” obstructed those who were democratically elected from ruling, and why were the people who exercised their human right in participating in the democratic process punished and pauperized? One cannot but reach the conclusion that there is no American or European official concern in helping initiate a process of genuine democratization. On the contrary, the obvious concern is how to increase foreign dominance and globalized imperialism.