Democracy in the Arab World

Challenges, Achievements and Prospects

... in Memory of Dr Abdel-Aiziz Assakaf ...
Democracy in the Arab World

Challenges, Achievements and Prospects
Table of Contents

Foreword vii

Introduction 1

Overview of the Situation in the Arab World 3

Common Democratic Themes in the Arab World 5

RELIGION AND POLITICS 5
DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS 6
ELECTIONS AND ELECTORAL SYSTEMS 8
ENHANCING WOMEN’S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION 9
ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT 11
FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION 12
PROTECTION OF ACTIVISTS 15
DEMOCRACY AND THE PEACE PROCESS 15
GLOBALIZATION 16

The Democratic Condition in the Arab World 17

MOROCCO 17
TUNISIA 18
EGYPT 19
LEBANON 20
JORDAN 21
YEMEN 22

List of Participants 25

Framework 27

INTERNATIONAL IDEA’S PROGRAMME IN THE ARAB REGION 27

About International IDEA 32

Map 34
Since its foundation in 1995 by states from different parts of the world, International IDEA (the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance) has been working towards assisting democracy world-wide. The Institute’s main objective is to promote and facilitate national and international dialogue, enhancing and strengthening democratic development.

After a series of exploratory missions to various parts of the Arab region, in 1999 International IDEA organized a round table gathering together experts from six Arab countries: Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and Yemen.

The objective of the round table was to analyse the perspectives on democratic development in the Arab region, and to identify challenges facing such development on the eve of the twenty-first century. International IDEA’s contribution to democratization through co-operating with Arab and international partners was one of the issues discussed.

The round table provided International IDEA with guidance for its comprehensive framework of programmes in the Arab region. This report is a summary of the round table discussions. International IDEA is pleased to share this report with all interested individuals and institutions.

We welcome comments on this report and contributions to our Arab region framework.

Bengt Säve-Söderbergh
Secretary-General
International IDEA
Introduction

In accordance with its mandate to promote sustainable democracy throughout the world, International IDEA has established contacts in the Arab region to explore common areas of interest. Introductory missions to Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Yemen and Morocco, as well as contacts in Tunisia, have provided preliminary encounters with important stakeholders in the democratic reform process in these countries.

The second phase of International IDEA’s consultative process was to host a round table in Stockholm to which a group of eminent Arab resource persons was invited. Entitled *The Future of Democratic Development in the Arab Region*, the round table took place on 28–29 March 1999 and involved participants from all six abovementioned countries. The participants represented a number of interest groups and political viewpoints. The purpose of the round table was two-fold:
1. To discuss future perspectives of democratic development in the region;
2. To develop suggestions for International IDEA’s future programmes and activities in support of the democratization process in the region.

All participants presented papers discussing the main challenges to democracy and the potential role that an organization such as International IDEA could play. The following pages of this document are a reflection of the main discussions of the round table. The first section presents a brief analysis of the major themes relevant throughout the region. The second section summarizes the substance of the presentations about the various countries. Finally, a framework for International IDEA’s programme in the Arab region based on the participants’ recommendations concludes this report.

International IDEA would like to thank all the participants and contributors to the round table for their efforts and support, which have helped the Institute design its framework for the Arab Region Programme.
The Arab World, a region stretching from Morocco in the west to Bahrain in the east, embraces portions of Africa, Asia, the Atlantic and Indian oceans, the Mediterranean and Red seas, in addition to the Arab-Persian Gulf. It is divided into two areas: the Maghreb (the North African countries), and the Mashreq, or the Levant, (the eastern region consisting of Egypt and the Arab-Asian countries).

With its 275 million inhabitants living in 22 countries (Egypt being the largest with a population of 60 million), the Arab world is a place where diverse cultural, social and political dynamics co-exist, creating both differences and similarities between the countries. The Arab identity, distinct from Islam, is based on two components: the Arabic language and history.

In modern history the Arab region was a part of the Ottoman Empire for more than four centuries. The Ottomans were succeeded by the French and the British colonial powers, under whose hegemony the geo-political borders of most of the countries were drawn (the “Sykes-Picot Agreement” in 1916), and the promise to create a Jewish state in Palestine (the “Balfour Declaration” in 1917). The origins of the subsequent conflicts in the region are to be found in this history.

Most of the Arab countries achieved independence after the Second World War, although the struggle continued until 1962 in the case of Algeria. By that time, however, the Arab-Israeli conflict had already emerged and the region became characterized by war and instability.

In addition, the oil boom in the Arab Peninsula attracted many contradictory interests, all seeking to control a region rapidly gaining an exceptional strategic significance. A series of foreign interventions and political destabilization factors further complicated the existing conflicts and created explosive regional tensions.

These complexities of the regional situation have often been used as a pretext for delaying democratic reforms and imposing “security measures” on Arab societies. Paradoxically, the peace process launched between the Arabs and Israel in 1991 provided yet another justification for delaying democratization: the establishment of political and economic stability to attract foreign investment in the period after the peace accord as well as the control of popular reactions against the peace accords which were perceived by many inhabitants of the region as unjust because they were imposed by the existing balance of power.

This historical demarche has had a substantial impact on the political, economic and cultural aspects of the Arab societies. The concept of the state and the role of state institutions (legislative and executive bodies, administration, the judiciary, military and security forces) were influenced by Ottoman and colonial experiences, which meant that accountability, transparency and political choices (leading to elections and alternation of power) were in short supply. As a result citizenship and political participation remained very weak.

Superimposed on this initial legacy there appeared a sequence of various ideologies, none of which succeeded in providing democracy, welfare and human development. The latest among these ideologies is neo-liberalism. Arriving in the wake of globalization, it has led to a
weakening of the socio-economic role of the state, thus widening the gap between social classes and spreading social tensions.

The failure of these various ideologies, the accumulation of socio-economic problems and the invasion of the new values of globalization have aggravated an identity crisis among new generations in the Arab region. The resulting vacuum has become a fertile ground for a number of forms of religious fundamentalism.

Positive and hopeful signs for democratization have appeared in a number of Arab countries in recent years, however, whether in the form of increased political participation and alteration of power within state institutions, or in terms of an increasingly active civil society working to enlarge the public space and defend basic freedoms.

Although no “wave” of democracy has swept over the Arab region, many important developments in the direction of political reform and modernization are nevertheless taking place. The impact of these developments on the region as a whole may gather further momentum for securing peace, prosperity and democracy in time to come. This momentum is supported by such important initiatives for economic and political co-operation as are provided for by the Euro-Mediterranean process.

However, the pressures for modernization and change should not obscure the fact that substantial constraints on democratic and economic reforms continue to exist throughout the Arab region. Together, the opportunities and constraints provide the rationale and incentive for concerted support activities by the international community.
Common Democratic Themes in the Arab World

During the round table discussions, the specific conditions and characteristics of democracy in each of the six countries have been presented through the eyes of a diverse array of actors. Although there are many differences, corresponding to each country’s particular circumstances and stage of economic, social and political development, there are nevertheless common threads interwoven in the fabric of these diverse situations. These “threads” were also the topic of intense discussions engaged in by presenters as well as observers during the round table – discussions which mirror and reiterate, almost to the last grimace, smile and sigh, debates which are going on within and among the diverse actors throughout the Arab world. The following section presents an overview and analysis of these common democratic concerns as they emerged during the presentations and discussions.

Religion and Politics

The diversity of opinions at the round table on the relationship between religion and politics reflected an important concern throughout the Arab region, particularly with regard to the validity (or lack thereof) of Islamism as an acceptable participant in political discourse. Some members of the round table argued that the arena of democratic discussion must be reserved solely for secular political discussion, since religious politics are perceived by their adherents to possess a “sacred” quality that automatically disqualifies those operating outside its framework. Others maintained that political Islam already constitutes a viable political opposition and as such must be included in any political dialogue, rather than ignored and marginalized. Ostracism, it was pointed out, could lead to further polarization within a number of societies and thus hamper, or obstruct, real democracy.

Feelings on this issue are generally high and it is possible to distinguish the broad outlines of two different camps: on the one hand, those who wish to mainstream religion, or at least argue for the inclusion of its protagonists in democratic dialogue; on the other, those who argue vehemently that “all religions are oppressive and exclusive” and, as such, anti-democratic. This debate is not new to democracy, but it does have special relevance in the context of a large Islamist movement throughout the Arab world – a development which is difficult to ignore or sideline. It is noteworthy that many women in particular tend to be most concerned with the possibility of Islamists coming to power. One participant voiced this concern by arguing, “Democracy should not include [violence] or be itself violent…and violence for me as a woman is to want to apply sharia\(^1\) literally”. And yet there are many others, men and women, who would counter that application of the sharia is the key to solving many social, political and even economic ills of the Arabs. For these people, the slogan “Islam is the solution” has come to denote not only a return to God spiritually, but a revamping of man-made laws and customs to conform to those supposedly ordained by God.

A complete reconciliation between these different camps may not be possible, but the split over how to handle Islamists points to the need to develop of some form of democratic “rules of

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\(^1\) Sharia is the body of Islamic law, and one of the features that all Islamists would prioritize in their political agendas, and claim the necessity to implement once/if they come to power.
the game”. It is noteworthy that the split is reflected in the diverse attitudes adopted by various Arab leaders vis-à-vis Islamists in their countries. The late monarchs of Jordan and Morocco finessed the problem, convincing many of the moderate Islamists to participate in the existing system and have their own representatives elected to the respective parliaments. Conversely, other Arab leaders, as in Algeria and Egypt have tried to co-opt some aspects of Islamist thinking and viciously clamped down on its adherents.

While rulers have adopted various strategies from the relative “security” of their positions of power, other political activists mirror the split more intensively and in a less organized or cohesive manner. Both for these activists as well as their power-wielding counterparts, democratic rules of the game would draw up much needed parameters of “dos and don’ts”, which would in turn apply to all parties – Islamist, leftist, or otherwise, whether in or out of power. Although it may seem like common sense, recognition of the need to agree on democratic parameters can neither be taken for granted nor assumed. One of the questions that arose repeatedly in the discussions was whether it is possible to include Islamists in any democratic dialogue.

Once there is some form of agreement on the rules of the game, debate may well shift to a more constructive dimension. In other words, the real question would not any longer be whether party x should be included, but how to include diverse political currents, i.e., what are the conditions for inclusion in a democracy? On this point, a definition is important, particularly in the context of the second issue in the debate on religion and politics, namely, confessionalism. The extent to which society should be polarized and ruled according to religious communities is a subject of much debate, with Lebanon being the major case study. Despite the 1989 peace treaty of Al-Ta’if, most Lebanese commentators argue that the division along confessional lines stipulated by the treaty may in fact consolidate, rather than ease, confessional tensions in the long run. Political rule along confessional lines is therefore perceived as at best a necessary evil that should be moved away from at the earliest opportunity. Yet how to achieve this change remains under discussion; once again, there is a visible cleft between those who argue for a complete separation between religion and politics, and those who see such a separation as unrealistic and untenable.

**DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS**

Western democracies resound with questions regarding the diminishing popularity of certain long-established democratic institutions, such as parliaments, political parties, and, in some areas, local government/councils. A number of recent elections – presidential, parliamentary, local and European – indicate a relative apathy among voters, many of whom question any “real difference” among the various political parties or their leaders. Particularly in Europe, the move towards more centrist politics raises questions not only about the future of political ideology, but also about the viability of political parties versus other institutions such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or specialized interest groups.

The Arab world is not immune to similar questions – although in the Arab context, the issues leading to these questions tend to arise from the consequences of decades of authoritarian rule,
conflict, overblown state bureaucracies and widespread corruption. The role of political parties in general has repeatedly proved itself to be a necessary basis for any political reform or development. Whether it is the credibility of a party’s political ideology, its capacity for mass appeal, its leadership ability and political know-how, its distance from authoritarian rule, or the increase in the number of women politicians, all these issues have at root the role and functioning of political parties. The emergence of a variety of NGOs (the six Arab countries visited by International IDEA alone boast more than 35,000 such organizations) has not only challenged state structures, but also provided viable alternatives to political parties.

It is possible to say that the weakness of political parties – and the subsequent mediocrity of their opposition to ruling regimes – is but a reflection of the impoverished state political discourse itself. Many of the oppositional parties in the Arab world today were effectively “allowed” to come into existence by the ruling regimes themselves. Furthermore, many of the leaders of these opposition parties seem reluctant to bow out of their positions. Thus the absence of democratic practices within these various parties raises serious doubt as to their capacity to rule democratically if they were to come to power. An example of this assertion can be seen in Morocco where the attempts of the current ruling coalition – led by a former staunch opposition party – to clamp down on certain protests raise doubts about its understanding of democratic principles. Such behaviour in fact leads to scepticism about extent to which such parties constitute a real alternative to those already in power and/or whether the parties are in tune with (or care for) public opinion.

Political parties are not the only democratic institution to come under scrutiny and discussion. The judiciary (and its function in regard to legislation) is another important question in the democratization process in the Arab region. The main issue here is twofold: the primary concern is the extent to which the judiciary is genuinely independent of the state or the ruling regime. A related issue is how to strengthen the judiciary by ensuring the implementation of a great deal of already existing legislation, thus bridging the gap between the *de jure* and *de facto* situations. In this context, various concerns regarding constitutional reform were often voiced. In both Jordan and Egypt constitutional reform is often under discussion, particularly those questions concerning the *sharia* as the basis of law and the separation of powers.

Another democratic institution that generated discussion and features prominently in many studies on democracy is the media. In most Arab countries, the media tends to be state-owned and thus controlled. The importance of the media as an avenue for the dissemination of information as well as a vehicle for communicating ideas, educating, polling, debating and discussing cannot be underestimated. A crippled media is a crippled means of information and debate. Furthermore, a controlled media is both an indication of an entrenched status quo and a source of long-term resentment. In many Arab countries the censorship of diverse media branches – radio, TV, newspapers and magazines – has led to intense debates. In Egypt and Jordan in particular, attempts by the governments to introduce new laws which would severely restrict journalists and other information specialists resulted in demonstrations and frantic lobbying against the proposals.
Opposition spokespersons argue that government control of media means alternative viewpoints are not afforded the same opportunities to reach the masses that governments have. Nevertheless, many of those involved in the print media in particular have found creative ways of evading censorship requirements; e.g., some of the newspapers are registered to organizations based in Cyprus. And Beirut, traditionally a haven for Arab intellectuals to publish their otherwise censored books, continues to function as an alternative forum.

The advent of satellite dishes means that it is becoming increasingly difficult to censor the variety of information on all the airwaves consistently. How Arab governments are choosing to react to this differs from one country to another. In general, however, there is a governmental awareness that nothing can be done, short of some drastic and impractical measure such as banning satellite dishes. Instead, some governments seem to be investing in launching their own satellite channels to counter the influence and popularity of other channels.

One issue concerning the relationship between the media and democracy that was mentioned by representatives of several Arab countries involves journalists and the election coverage. In most Arab countries journalists voiced the dilemma of conflicting loyalties during the coverage of elections. Among the questions facing journalists are whether to be completely honest and thus risk embarrassing a candidate or a party that they strongly support and that is fighting against difficult odds, or how to report honestly without risking their own lives or careers. A code of conduct for a democratic media seems to be a requirement to protect journalists and insure their freedom of expression and coverage of events.

ELECTIONS AND ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

This is one area in which the call for action was unanimous. The issues involved here can be broadly divided into two categories: there is a lack of information on viable alternative electoral systems and their respective impact, and there is the problem of providing for “free and fair elections” in contexts in which rulers may not necessarily want to give public opinion free reign.

In Jordan the problems arise from the changing political climate (including problems arising from the earlier presence of Islamists in parliament which disturbed pro-government forces) and the need to minimize the chances of parties abusing electoral processes. Lebanon meanwhile continues searching for an electoral system adequate to deal with confessionalism and the resulting political, structural and practical complexities of a system, which has brought former warlords into parliament as legitimate members. Yet another country, Yemen, is interested in constructing an electoral system which would justly reflect the voices of different sectors of the population (particularly the unhappy southerners) and also deal with tribal allegiances.

Moroccans are concerned mostly about fraud and how to handle different interest groups – politicians, journalists, members of the public, etc. – in the electoral process. Egyptians are particularly interested in topics related to popular participation in electoral processes (ranging from political apathy to voting, registration, ballots and the counting of votes), as well as the means of safeguarding against government control and falsification of results. For these reasons – among others – many Arab civil society actors are keen on comparing their situation with

DEMONCRACY IN THE ARAB WORLD

Challenges, Achievements and Prospects
others to learn more about different kinds of electoral systems, their applicability and their results. It is no coincidence that a number of the currently-existing electoral systems are modelled along those of former colonial powers, giving rise to a need for more and comparative information on various electoral possibilities. International IDEA, which has already provided advice on possible electoral systems to Jordan, is well-placed to assist in these endeavours.2

Those holding power in Arab governments have traditionally demonstrated reluctance to relinquish their power, and the Algerian situation is usually taken as an example of what happens to governments which decide to implement “free and fair” elections. In other words, there is a very real fear on the part of many of the Arab regimes that free and fair elections would oust them from power in no time at all. A common excuse promulgated by non-democratic leaders is that the Arab people do not know what is good for them and they might therefore abuse democracy, were it not controlled. As a result, elections – when and if they are to be held on whatever level – have to be “carefully monitored” and their results equally carefully “handled”. In the meantime, governments promise to undertake the necessary education of the people and prepare them for “total” democracy. Yet how this preparation is to be carried out remains unclear. Against the background of this general scenario, the Moroccan experience stands out as unique: after opposition parties gained more votes than the government during parliamentary elections, a leader of one of these parties and former dissident was actually asked by the King to form a government. In spite of widespread recognition that elections by no means constitute the sole requirement for democracy, and furthermore provide no panacea, there is nonetheless a firm realization that they remain an integral aspect of democratization processes as such, and need to be understood and made optimal use of.

**Enhancing Women’s Political Participation**

Women constitute more than 50% of the population of each country in the Arab world. Yet, the percentage of women in parliament does not exceed 3% overall.3 The proportion of women in other political decision-making positions is equally low, despite the absence of formal statistics on the issue – a situation which itself requires resources to redress. In particular the female participants of the Tunisian, Egyptian, Yemeni and Moroccan delegations to the International IDEA round table noted that the fact that half of the population does not enjoy equal access to decision-making occupations constitutes a serious and, indeed, unacceptable bar to any democratic endeavour.

While there is no question that the low numbers of women in political positions is a serious lack, it is also necessary to address the question of how to maximize the impact of those already in politics. An aspect of the problem mentioned during the round table is the presence of “alibi women”, or tokens – the select few women who are appointed to specific positions and then touted as an indication of women in power. As with other instances of such tokenism, these

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3 Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) 1998 statistics on Internet www://http.ipu.org
“alibi women” tend, for a variety of reasons, to distance themselves from efforts to deal with low female representation or any other gender-related matters. At the same time, these female tokens are used by the male-dominated ruling elite as evidence of a “commitment to women”, with the implication that they are fulfilling their responsibilities in that regard. As many engaged women activists argue, however, the issue of enhancing women’s political participation goes beyond tokenism and is to a large extent dependent upon the presence of strong and committed women politicians.

Over the last 10 years, a number of initiatives have concentrated on enhancing women’s political participation. Advocates of these initiatives have tended to be mostly NGOs and international and/or intergovernmental organizations, with some government assistance in the corresponding countries. Most of these attempts have succeeded in prioritizing the issue and bringing it to the fore on a number of levels. International conferences in particular, such those in as Nairobi in 1985, Cairo in 1994, and Beijing (and Huairou) in 1995, have provided significant momentum and outreach to all local, regional and international initiatives. In the meantime, many of the donor organizations have themselves prioritized gender concerns throughout their development programmes, resulting in widespread familiarity with the notions of “women in politics” and “women in development”.

These are important steps which have, in the passage of time, constituted giant leaps forward. What remains is a concentrated effort to deal with the issue of women’s political participation not merely as a factor of numbers, but also as a means of enhancing the impact of those women who have already braved social, cultural, economic and political barriers to reach position of significant political clout. As with the above mentioned case of democratic institutions, a certain myopic view of women’s achievements in the Arab world has set in, with the low numbers of women in political institutions serving to consolidate this myopia. Two important facts remain, however: the traditional definition of politics has straight-jacketed women all over the world and led to a serious misrepresentation of their efforts and their achievements; furthermore, Arab women in particular, in view of their complex situation (colonial legacy, lack of resources, and conflicts within the societies, to name but a few), have achieved a great deal over the last decade.

To date, little effort has been made to collate the data on sex-segregation that would be necessary for the understanding of women’s voting habits, for example the questions of how many women vote, or how, and on what basis. Neither is there clear information about how many women are in which political positions, or how they arrived there. What, it must be asked, are the needs of women politicians? How are they able to work in a male-dominated environment, which itself is still struggling for democracy? Questions such as these need to be posed, researched and discussed, and the answers disseminated.

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ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

“Why are economic “reforms” good and advocated at every opportunity, but political reform bad and obstructed at every opportunity?” This is one of the questions, voiced by one of the participants at the round table, that is on the minds of many in the Arab world. “Development” – primarily economic and social – is always on the agenda of Arab rulers, as it is on the agenda of all developing countries. In fact, according to official rhetoric, development is a byword for the “three Ps” – progress, prosperity and peace – but not politics.

The assumption behind the apparent schizophrenia is itself flawed, for it is, after all, logical to assume that once people’s basic needs are fulfilled, they will turn their attention to the others: political/ideological, spiritual, and secondary material needs. However, it is equally significant that even when poverty reigns and people are mainly concerned with their daily bread, it is erroneous to assume that they will not be interested in political development. In fact, as examples from all over the world show – from poor and rich nations alike – human rights issues related to expression, association, and participation will inevitably appear on the political agenda at some point in time. Why then do Arab regimes promote one type of development and attempt to deny the other?

The answer to the question is evident throughout this report. It is possible simply to argue that political development, i.e., democracy, is seen as threatening to the majority of Arab regimes. In many Arab countries, the military is the most privileged sector of society, politically, socially and economically. As the history of other nations indicates, neither the regimes nor the military power that supports them tend to relinquish power easily. This is one of the factors behind the controlled dosage of political freedoms allowed to many Arab peoples today.

As in many such conflict situations, it is important to consider “what is in it?” so to speak, for the rulers or ruling regimes of the Arab World. Economic development has long been an avenue to increased power – nationally, regionally and globally. After all, the more resources a nation has, the more it can fulfil its needs, and the more likely it becomes to acquire standing as “potential [equal] partners” with the powerful nations of the world. This understanding stands in contrast to the perception of the same ruling elites that to decentralize power to their people in all probability effectively means to lose their own power.

The above “win-win/lose-lose” logic espoused by many rulers and ruling regimes was one of the features discussed during the round table. This points to the fact that important concepts such as “power-sharing” and the delegation of authority are not a part of the thinking of many of those in power in the Arab world. Accountability and transparency to a public which can ultimately oust you from power is almost non-existent. Neither is the idea of allowing the people a free choice from among a wide variety of credible and experienced potential political leaders who are competing for the public’s attention (and votes) with varied and clear agendas. Whereas this reluctance on the part of the de facto leaders could be – and often is – dismissed simply as a feature of “poor democratic culture”, the fact remains that there is a genuine absence of political management training. This lack parallels the Arab situation, where in effect
charismatic power politics has dominated the scene for several decades. In other words, starting at a very early stage and continuing through its educational establishments, the Arab world needs to train and mentor political leadership and management. At the outset, however, the issue of what present leaders have to gain from such a change must be pragmatically confronted and addressed. It is unrealistic to assume that a revolution is stirring and will eventually explode to allow many Arab peoples to say how they wish to be governed. It is more reasonable to operate on the assumption that current Arab ruling regimes can learn to see that it is in their interest to work towards tangible political reforms.

Linking economic to political development has, over the last five years in particular, increasingly dominated the attention of international organizations and governments. One of the outcomes of this linkage is the concept of “conditionality”, or making efforts towards political reform a condition of being granted development aid. Although some recipient countries have accepted this conditionality, the Arab world is one of the regions where conditionality has raised both ideological as well as practical difficulties.

On the other hand, initiatives existing within the context of the Euro-Mediterranean (Euro-Med) partnership agreements and resulting from the debates and initiatives of the Barcelona process stand a good chance of overcoming many of these sensitivities. The major challenge that these initiatives may face is to inspire commitment to them among the larger NGO communities and particularly at the grassroots level. At the time, despite some of the rhetoric, many of the Euro-Med arrangements and their related effects operate in the same way as most international conventions and treaties – i.e., with a top-down logic that rarely trickles down to the masses at the base.

**Freedom of Association**

The previous point concerning the activity of NGOs brings us to the ongoing discussion in the Arab world regarding freedom of association, or the extent to which non-governmental organizations are allowed to form and operate. Non-governmental forums range from political parties to voluntary associations of varying sizes, objectives and means. As mentioned earlier, many of the existing political parties in the Arab world which are not a part of the government are allowed to exist only through the beneficence of the ruler(s) – a situation which inevitably compromises their freedom to manoeuvre as an opposition. Partly as a consequence, many of the existing political parties have lost their credibility, and with it their popularity among the masses. It is also true, however, that some of these parties are struggling with an ideological vacuum in what is in any case a global absence of grand and credible political schemes. In addition, the structure of the parties themselves mirror some of the general institutional socio-political problems such as lack of transparency and corruption.

That said, however, the fact remains that setting up a political party with legal status remains one of the most difficult tasks to accomplish in many parts of the Arab world. There are many active units which, in all but name, function as a political party, but without legal standing, and are thus prey to any governmental clampdown. Withholding of legal status is a key feature in
the policy of a number of governments, and is carried out through the law courts. The process whereby an association applies for recognition as a party is usually a long and complicated one, designed to discourage any potential applicants. Parties which meet the criteria laid out in the various constitutions (e.g., a party may not be based on religion, promote schisms within the society, or work against the country’s national security interests) are few and far between, because the legal clauses are often interpreted from the vantage point of those in power.

It is interesting to note that the participants in the International IDEA round table were more concerned with the reform of political parties than with gaining official recognition for them precisely because of the crisis of confidence engulfing most political parties. Some party leaders in the Arab world argue that they are seriously hindered in their performance because of the difficulties imposed on them by the ruling regimes. These difficulties range from lack of resources, to harassment of members and occasional clampdowns. Whereas these claims are difficult to challenge, it is also a fact that internal democracy in any institution need not be a function of material resources or external circumstances. The question that is uppermost on the minds of many, therefore, remains how to rekindle the faith in political parties and encourage them to be more democratic.

In most of the Arab countries an issue generating much debate and tension with governments is the law governing associations – their formal registration, funding and functioning. Whether in Egypt, Tunisia or Morocco, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) bitterly complain about repressive laws. In Lebanon the situation is somewhat different because the debated issue is rather the government’s attempts to impose more restrictions on a relatively liberal law that dates back to the Ottoman period. The main point of contention between the NGOs and the government is similar to that of the political parties: the government attempts to control and dominate the thinking and activities of these organizations. Typically governments attempt to use the law of association to censure activities having a political impact which they interpret as “troublesome”. In fact, many of these restrictive laws (particularly in Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Yemen) stipulate that an NGO should not be involved in political activities at all.

In some of these countries, laws make it difficult to obtain foreign funding for activities and entitle governments; to ban organizations receiving such aid if they see fit; to appoint government officials to the boards, or even divert the assets of one organization to another. Whatever the context and the specific stipulations, the main complaint remains that NGOs generally feel heavily censured politically and economically. In the words of one NGO activist, “it is as if our hands are constantly tied”. Such activists would argue that democracy is about empowering civil society, and NGOs form the bulwark of the process. In effect, to hamper the activities of NGOs is to disempower key civil society institutions.

Governments tend to counter with the argument that what is at stake ultimately is “national security”, and that to allow these organizations to operate without control might render them vulnerable to “manipulation” by external interests. In addition, the governments contend that these organizations need some form of supervision to enhance their own professionalism and ensure that they are serving national concerns rather than those of a particular group or
individual. It is the government’s obligation, they often claim, to protect the people from those who have interests other than those of their own nation’s in mind – even if these are well-intentioned. The underlying notion in some countries is related to the funding issue, the logic being that organizations which obtain foreign funding are susceptible to having their agendas influenced by these donors, or to benefit the donors in some way at the direct or indirect expense of the government/country. This big-brother, state-centred logic is endemic to the structures of government in the Arab world; yet it must be pointed out that debates over the issue of funding do not differ in substance from those conducted in the US and the UK with regard to political parties. National security is thus often used as an excuse to clamp down on the activities of associations within civil society as well as on individuals.

Another situation in which national security is used to justify certain repressive government actions is that of “terrorism”. Participants in the round table were keen to stress that Arab states were able to overcome differences among themselves – a prodigious feat at the best of times – by using the argument of national security and invoking the need to clamp down on “terrorist activities” as defined solely by themselves. In other words, Arab governments stand united against insurgents – mostly Islamists – in the name of national security.

The counter argument, or proposal, put forward by civil society actors in the Arab countries is that national security is not, and should not be, solely the domain of the state. By appropriating national security in this way, the state often risks or actually perpetrates undue violence against the institutions and actors of civil society. Indeed, they would argue that the concept of national security needs to be seen in a holistic sense and accordingly be shared by political parties, civil society and the state. In other words, what is required is a definition – or a redefinition, as the case may be – of this concept in such a way as to clarify its content, context, and parameters. Such a clarification would facilitate a shared engagement in the issue of national security, with the implication that current state restrictions on the freedom of association, and indeed of opinion, would not be necessary.

One of the recurrent questions emerging from the abovementioned themes relates to existing regimes and their involvement in the democratization process, or even their willingness (or lack thereof) for democratization. “What is in it for me?” is a legitimate question that Arab leaders have uppermost on their minds, and which determines the extent to which they are willing to facilitate or obstruct democracy. It is true that the Arab world has lost two of its longest-serving leaders (Kings Hussein and Hassan of Jordan and Morocco respectively) within six months, and that we are now faced with new (and younger) leaders and thus new strategies. It is also true that changeover is something that will inevitably happen across the Arab world in the not too distant future – with some new leaders more predictable than others.

What needs to be studied in each country respectively are questions such as: is it easier to be democratic or authoritarian? which approach is more profitable in the short-term and in the long-term? what do the rulers have to gain from democracy and what do they have to lose? It is

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5 For a related argument see the sections on economic and political development, p 11, and the protection of activists, p 15.
necessary that attempts to answer these questions – among others – form the mainstay of any programme to facilitate and enhance the democratic processes in the Arab world.

**PROTECTION OF ACTIVISTS**

This issue was mentioned by almost all participants and is indeed a problem common to the entire Arab region – and not just the six countries present at the round table. Government-supported activism will continue to be a deterrent to democratization endeavours in the region as long as democracy is seen as a gift or a favour to be bestowed by the ruler(s) on the people, rather than as a right and an obligation of government. As one participant explained, “This is a favour that can be revoked according to whim, and [activists] are made to know this, and therefore almost live in fear of it”. The issue of safety is not marginal: it is connected to the notion of the stability and security of the population, indeed to citizenship itself, and in turn, to respect for human rights in general.

However, not only have organizations like Amnesty International existed and operated for a number of years, in addition, a multitude of support groups and organizations have emerged to lobby governments for or against particular decisions relating to human rights and/or democracy issues. The impact of such organizations is hard to gauge, though it is certain that they have contributed to a general improvement and have certainly been useful as a locus of recourse for those with grievances. The fact remains that these international and/or “foreign” organizations operate within an environment which is sensitive to “external intervention” – particularly that originating in western countries.

Hence, those who attempt to offer protection to activists have only a limited effectiveness and, at best, a conditional and more or less selective impact on the problem. Establishing this protection can be achieved only by convincing the governments in question that respect for democratic norms and values is actually beneficial to these same governments – or to any ruling body. How this endeavour is to be carried out remains a subject of much discussion and debate. What is certain is that the mechanism for convincing ruling bodies of the need to actually respect democratic principles is an issue lying at the heart of any attempts towards real democratic reform throughout the Arab world. In fact, this need will constitute a running thread throughout these discussions.

**DEMOCRACY AND THE PEACE PROCESS**

The peace process between the Arab countries and Israel plays an important role in impacting on the extent to which Arab rulers have been able to push ahead with democratic reforms. Participants at the round table pointed out that in both Jordan and Egypt, for example, public opinion on the legitimacy of the rulers was closely connected to acceptance (or lack thereof) of any attempts to normalize relations with Israel. In Jordan, public opinion against the peace arrangements signed by the late monarch with Israel effectively led to the withdrawal of the King’s “permission” for further democratization endeavours. Likewise, Egyptians have experienced a serious clampdown by the authorities whenever discussions relating to normalization of relations with Israel were taking place. A similar scenario recurs almost
inevitably in the Palestinian territories. This situation presents a paradox in which peace settlements lead not to a democratic wave in the region, but to more repression on many political activities and public freedoms.

Some participants indicated as well that the perception dominating the minds of many of those in the Arab region is that “peace” imposed through the existing balance of power – as has been the case until now – is unjust and therefore undemocratic.

It is important to note that there are obvious differences in the extent to which democratization endeavours have been affected by the peace process. In Tunisia and Morocco for example, the peace process with Israel has not featured in the internal political agendas. In fact, the late Moroccan King Hassan was well known for being instrumental in bringing together a number of Arab and Israeli leaders, and the Moroccan Jewish community – unique perhaps in the Arab world – is visibly and peacefully integrated in the larger society.

In general, it may be said that the countries which share borders with Israel are those whose political discourse on democracy is most directly connected to events relating to Israel and the peace process.

**GLOBALIZATION**

For the last few years the Arab region, as other areas of the world, has been struggling with the impact of globalization.

Without entering into debates on the definition of globalization, participants at the round table reviewed the main challenges imposed by this trend on the Arab region. The consensus was that, in addition to its positive aspects (e.g., circulation of information, access to news and the better sharing of international experiences), globalization has had in many respects not only a negative impact on the Arab region politically and economically, but also has deepened identity crises and threatened local values through an emphasis on consumption and market culture.

Globalization has taken place without participation in global political decision-making processes, and its economic benefits have not been shared globally. Consequently, the economic gap between the Arab region (as part of the Southern Hemisphere) and the Northern has increased tremendously in the past years.

By way of conclusion, globalization constitutes an important challenge in its impact on political, economic and cultural developments related to the democratization process in the Arab region.
The following section is an overview of the presentations and discussions analysing challenges facing democratic processes in Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and Yemen.

The overview presents the different opinions expressed during the round table and adopts the terminology used by the various contributors.

MOROCCO

Within the last three years Morocco has undergone a unique experience of alternance or tanawub (alteration of power) whereby the democratically elected opposition was called upon by the late King Hassan II to form a government. One of the results was the creation of a ministry unique to the Arab world: the Ministry of Human Rights.

The main features of the Moroccan situation may be characterized as follows: two distinct cultural heritages (Arab and African); an Islamic-based political system combined with a constitutional monarchy in which the king plays a major role as both the political and spiritual leader; relative stability despite the turbulence of its next-door neighbour (Algeria), a high rate of unemployment and poverty, a crippled educational system and a constant threat of militant Islamism.

Against this background, the main democratic achievements in Morocco over recent years are:

- The Constitutional Amendment of 1992 which specified for the first time Morocco’s obligation to observe human rights as internationally agreed upon;
- The setting up of a Consultative Human Rights Council;
- The creation of a specialized Human Rights Ministry;
- The setting up of specialized courts to assess administrative disputes;
- The creation of a Consultative Council to discuss civil dialogue;
- The experience of alternation of rule;
- The process of decentralization currently taking place, (along with associated issues concerning the delegation of authority both via the ballot and via the king).

In spite of arguments that Morocco is well on its way towards achieving a genuine democracy, some major challenges remain. These can be summarized under political, socio-economic, administrative and legal rubrics as follows:

- The extent to which elections are actually “free and fair”;
- The current age limit for voters, currently set at 21 (considered too high);
- Reform of the electoral system;
- A more efficient and representative parliamentary system;
- High rates of illiteracy and children’s lack of access to education;
- Poverty and socio-economic crises;
- Women’s status as second-class citizens;
- Large and inefficient bureaucracies;
- Corruption;
The gap between *de jure* and *de facto*, i.e., between legal pronouncements and their implementation.

The lack of faith in politicians and political representation in general. (The latter was compounded by the present government’s use of violence against demonstrators.)

As far as Moroccan women are concerned, a wide gap exists between what they are legally entitled to and what they actually manage to obtain. Despite constituting over fifty per cent of the population and fifty per cent of the electorate, and despite Article 8 of the Constitution which states that all Moroccans are equal citizens, there are very few women in decision-making positions in Morocco. The parliamentary elections of 1993 offer an illustrative statistic: Women numbered 37 out of the 2,072 candidates, and only two were elected out of 333. In addition to the discrepancy between legal rights and actual realities, certain cultural notions further complicate the process of women’s political participation.

In the meantime, King Hassan of Morocco has died and it is left to his elder son to take the reins. Like his Jordanian counterpart, the late King Hussein, King Hassan finessed the Islamists, many of whom learned to play the political game. In both Morocco and Jordan, both the crown princes and current new kings are highly educated and well-versed in their own as well as western cultural values and norms. Both are in their 30s and over a number of years were quietly groomed to take power eventually. A new generation always brings with it the rays of hope for change. Although in neither case is radical change in the ruling structure to be expected, nonetheless, the hope for a different and more open manner of handling their power as monarchs is on the minds of many citizens. Time will tell to what extent the new generation of politicians may alter the face of Arab democracy.

**Tunisia**

In contrast to a number of other Arab countries, Tunisia has buttressed a firm distinction between the religious and the political spheres with legal pronouncements and constitutional articles. However, the separation between the “religious” and the “political” has yet to be fully effected. The mutual interference between the two realms promotes a non-universalistic definition of human rights, lending crucial importance not only to the issue of specificity, but also to interpretations of equality (such as gender equality with regards to inheritance, etc.). The lack of distinction leads to confusion, which in turn takes the form of a serious impediment to the growth of democracy.

The attempts of the state to control association through legislation restrict the autonomy of civil society and interfere with its normal functioning. This control is expressed by measures such as the law of 7 November 1959, (amended on 3 August 3 1988 and 2 April 1992) granting the Ministry of Interior the right to oppose the formation of an association. Hence the prospective founding members are required to present the statutes (charter, founding articles, by-laws) of the organization and abstain from undertaking any action until the Ministry has given a verdict. These procedures, however, contradict Article 8 of the Constitution. The latest amendments in 1997 re-organized the classification of associations under a single category of
“association of general character”, and removed all restrictions regulating individual membership (adherence) for all associations, regardless of the organization’s by-laws or the reservations of the existing members. In addition, the amendments debar the leadership of any association from affiliation with a political party. Within a period of three months, the supervising authorities are required to conclude their examination of the application dossier, and to provide the association’s prospective founding members with official notification of the decision. Theoretically, a receipt issued by the government upon submission of the dossier determines the deadline for this process, and if the deadline elapses without the members having been informed of an official rejection of their application, the formation of the association is considered legal. However, few prospective associations are provided with a receipt of submission of a dossier, thus indefinitely extending the deadline of the recognition process.

Beyond these practical bureaucratic detours, the deeper problem lies in the practical understanding of democratic practice and political systems. The official political organs of discourse relentlessly claim their acceptance of and support for democracy, human rights, and civil society; however the understanding of democracy and the role of civil society is particularized to suit the authorities: civil society, rather than being a counter-force to the power of the state, is presented as its “partner”. In this way, the potential control and opposition provided by a system of checks and balances are subdued. The government’s interference in the establishment of associations – a constituent component of civil society – causes a sterile atomization of society and thwarts the crystallization of interest groups and formation of social movements. Hence the transformative potential of civil society and progress towards democracy are aborted.

Democracy in Tunisia, therefore, remains divorced from reality. A number of changes are needed in the area of laws and practices to resurrect an environment where social actors can fully participate in the responsibilities of public life and reclaim the entitlements of citizenship and of a pluralistic society.

**Egypt**

The current situation in Egypt allows the perpetuation of certain obstacles to democracy. These obstacles can be summarized as follows:

- A lack of cumulative results through the government’s constant revision and reintroduction of certain laws;
- A new law of association that weakens the independence of the NGOs;
- The cleft between development and democracy, whereby liberalization becomes a matter of form and not substance;
- A socio-economic situation where illiteracy, poverty and unemployment are very high;
- The failure of the educational system to educate about democracy;
- External interference and the imposition of solutions which sustain certain undemocratic institutions and regimes;
Weak political parties which fail to play an effective role in politics and in building citizenship;

The lack of independence in the judiciary system.

For the last – and probably most important – of these problems, a number of factors need to be examined. These factors range from the Emergency Laws, which remain effective in Egypt still today, to an amendment of the Constitutional Court (CC) Law which effectively permits the president of the country to appoint the president of the CC without consulting the parliament. Nonetheless, many of the rulings of the CC have at times taken the government itself to task for violating certain principles.

In addition to the abovementioned challenges, there are problems with indigenizing the concept of democracy. These problems have their roots in general illiteracy and extreme poverty, as well as in a lack of experience in democratic practice, structures and institutions. Violence, on the part of the government as well as certain groups, continues to be seen as a means to counter opposition, and thus further interferes with democratization.

Finally, it should be taken into consideration, whether in Egypt or elsewhere in the Arab region, that:

- The role of the judiciary in strengthening democracy is cumulative process, requiring that both time and faith to be devoted to it;
- The role of education is fundamental to any democratic aspiration;
- The Arab identity is neither weakened nor threatened by democratization, but the values propagated through the control exerted by means of certain media are problematic.
- What is being witnessed in Egypt should be viewed in terms of a process of liberalization, as opposed to one of democratization.

Democracy has to grow from within, and caution is needed here: failure to promote indigenous democracy may well result in the strengthening of arguments and movements which advocate dogma and violence. Furthermore, human rights must be seen as an integral premise of democracy in order to ensure that both present and future forms of rule in the region keep this quality firmly in mind.

LEBANON

Political life in Lebanon is characterized by the following:

- Organization largely along confessional lines;
- A strong patron-client system;
- Periodical crisis and political instability;
- A weak state (possibly the weakest in the Arab world);
- A lack of social cohesiveness resulting in a fragile society;
- Active and unavoidable external sources of influence (especially Syria and Israel);
- Israeli occupation of 50% of the southern part of the country;
- Marginalization of political parties and weak political participation;
- An energetic and vital civil society, but deformed and designed to serve confessional communities.
In spite of these problems, the political system, though not democratic, is characterized by the persistence of freedoms, although not to an extent that would threaten the regime or the established political elite. Many factors account for these areas of freedom in the Lebanese society. Among them is the delicate confessional equilibrium among the various religious groups, who all fear the reactions of the others if they abuse power. This same confessional equilibrium, however, has paradoxically weakened the notion of citizenship and led to many crises due to its rigidity and rejection of reform and development.

What is missing in Lebanon is “real” citizenship – one that would allow the development of democratic practices based on the national interests rather than confessional ones.

The challenges may be summarized as follows:

- Development of modern, non-confessional political parties and civil society organizations that can raise citizenship awareness;
- Exploration of the possibilities of enhancing a culture of democracy, accountability and transparency;
- Strengthening the independence of the judiciary;
- Development of a new electoral law;
- Development of a campaign finance law;
- Development of a comprehensive code of ethics for campaign media coverage;
- Investigation of the possibility of establishing an independent national electoral commission.

Long-term solutions need to be encouraged to these challenges. The solutions need to revolve around the development of a “real” democratic political system that will allow more social integration in Lebanon.

JORDAN

The major challenge to democratization in Jordan does not lie in the constitution or in legislation, but in engendering respect for them and ensuring both their comprehension and implementation. Nevertheless, democracy does not imply a single system of governance, and basic differences underly each form of democratic rule. In addition to the institutions which establish and safeguard democracy, successful democracy requires that people have total faith in it, in much the same way they would believe in a religion.

In Jordan the process of democratization has occurred in fits and starts. The peaceful transformation to democracy started in 1989 with the mithaq, or Charter on Civil Liberties, which was the outcome of a committee (set up “with the blessings” of the late King Hussein) composed of the major actors in Jordanian civil society. The mithaq was seen primarily as a tool to break down the barriers between state and civil society. One of the main obstacles to this process has been the intrusion of tribalism and its increased influence on the Jordanian polity.

The requirements for a smoother and more definitive democratization process can therefore be summarized as follows:

- The realization that the future of democracy is dependent on the position of those in power, and their awareness of the fact that the present status quo is untenable:
The need for constitutional reform which would balance out the three rival powers (bearing in mind that any constitutional amendments have been ruled out by the powers that be).

In view of the important role of civil institutions in articulating the interests of the people, these institutions need to develop their agendas and capabilities in order to come up with viable programmes.

The importance of the judiciary, as an essential point of reference in any democratic reform, and specifically the development of the institutional capacities of the different courts;

The necessity of acknowledging the capable and challenging political opposition, which may well include certain religious currents. In this context, it is necessary to ensure that the Islamist challenge as a political opposition is not ignored, and that a dialogue between the nationalists and the Islamists takes place, which should lead to a more general democratic atmosphere.

The death of King Hussein has placed the mantle of power on new shoulders. In view of the sensitivity of Jordan’s politics, particularly in regard to its immediate neighbours, the new king is expected to continue with his father’s politics and policies. The concerns expressed thus far by observers are not so much with what his rule will be like, but rather with how he will do his job. The implied question here is whether the young king will be able to exhibit the same political finesse and shrewdness which decades of experience had taught his father. As in the case of Morocco, although seismic changes are not expected, the extent of deep involvement in the day-to-day running of the country may well witness a difference. Time, at any rate, will tell.

YEMEN

Yemen’s unique history of partition and reunification creates enormous difficulties with regard to balancing the need for democracy with the requirements of a centralized state, which would provide unity, stability and solve the dire economic needs of the country.

The process of democratization in Yemen can be characterized by the following:

- It originated as a result of a political decision and not as a consequence of public demand;
- It coincided with the unification process, with all its inherent complexities and unresolved dissonance. The rumblings of discontent in the south of Yemen, where there is still a feeling of resentment after the civil war (1994), cannot be ignored or repressed;
- It led to the emergence of many parties which were previously underground and which have not developed that much intra- and inter-party dialogue;
- The weakness of the economic, social and political infrastructure, the latter of which includes a weak central government;
- Tribalism;
- High rates of illiteracy;
- Unequal distribution of wealth (with economic wealth concentrated in the hands of a few);
- A situation where elections have become a means for redistribution of wealth (whereupon votes are exchanged for economic favours);
- The prominent and yet ill-defined role of military role;
- Serious dissonance among the different political parties;
The relative uniqueness of this democratic experiment in the region (with the exception of the latest developments in terms of the elections in Qatar), with its possibility of fostering or retarding the process. Yemen is not immune from the influence of its direct “big brother” and neighbour, Saudi Arabia, with whom an ongoing border conflict occasionally emerges. Any democratic development in Yemen is bound to worry its neighbour, who would be concerned about possible repercussions of such trends within its own borders.

All these factors combined would pose serious challenges to any fledgling democracy. What is required is the building of a common sense of loyalty to the institutions of the state and the civil society rather than exclusively to the tribe or the family.

On another level, the question uppermost in the minds of many with a similar democratic inclinations in many parts of the Arab world was the issue of safety. Namely, what are the mechanisms (national, regional and international) to protect democracy activists from the often “ungentle” hands of the state or related apparatus? Safety, or the sense of security to preach and practice democratic principles, has been an essential element for a vibrant and effective civil society in any democracy. Without it, fear was the overriding factor which prevented many potential democrats from emerging out of the woodworks, eventually leading to the dominance of authoritarianism.

What is to stop the Arab leaders from retracing their steps on the road to political reform? How can public opinion be made to carry weight? “Rulers care more about what the outside world thinks that about what their own people feel”. Hence: how can it be ensured that Arab leaders learn to manage change through an appreciation of public responsibility? These were questions to be addressed in parallel with the questions related to institutional Democracy processes in Yemen.
### List of Participants

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Organization</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>From Morocco</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr Mohamad Benyahya</td>
<td>Professor at Mohamad V University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Naima Farrah</td>
<td>Special Adviser to the Minister of Public Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>From Tunisia</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dr Khadija Cherif</td>
<td>Professor at Tunis University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>From Egypt</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Mohamad Fayek</td>
<td>President of the Arab Organization for Human Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Issam Eddin Hasan</td>
<td>Adviser to the Egyptian Legal Rights Aid Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Jihan Abou Zeid</td>
<td>Vice-president of the Women’s NGO Forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>From Lebanon</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr Nawwaf Salam</td>
<td>lawyer and Professor at the American University of Beirut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr Paul Salem</td>
<td>Director of the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr Hasan Krayyem</td>
<td>Professor at the American University of Beirut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Ziad Abdel-Samad</td>
<td>Co-ordinator, Arab NGO Network for Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>From Jordan</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Ahmad Obeidat</td>
<td>lawyer and former prime minister</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>From Yemen</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Oras Naji</td>
<td>Member of the Parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr Abdel-Aziz Al-Saqqaf</td>
<td>Editor-in-Chief of the Yemen Times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr Khadija Al-Haythami</td>
<td>Professor at the Sana’a University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>From International IDEA</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Roel von Meijenfeldt</td>
<td>Director of Programmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Ziad Majed</td>
<td>Programme Officer, Arab World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr Azza Karam</td>
<td>Adviser to the Arab World Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr Sakuntala Kadíngmar</td>
<td>Senior Executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Arminch Arakelian</td>
<td>Senior Programme Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Anna Nordenmark</td>
<td>Programme Assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Nina Seppälä</td>
<td>Assistant Programme Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>From UNDP</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Moez Doraid</td>
<td>Chief and Co-ordinator, Arab States Sub-Regional Resource Facilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From SIDA
Ms Anne Bruzelias

From the Swedish Government
Ms Ann Wilkens

From the Spanish Government
Mr Ramon Blecua Casas
Based on all these presentations and analyses, as well as other consultative processes, a framework for the Arab region has been prepared. Its purpose is to guide the development of International IDEA’s programmes in the Arab region.

While most of the topics highlighted in the framework are valid for the majority of Arab countries, it is nonetheless important to recognize that the dynamics for reform processes are embodied within the peculiarities of each individual country. The regional approach is adopted because of the interconnectedness of the region.

**INTERNATIONAL IDEA’S PROGRAMME IN THE ARAB REGION**

1. The main thematic areas for review and support have been identified in International IDEA’s consultations under the following five headings:

   A. Increase the democratic substance of formal institutional arrangements:
      - Support of constitutional review and amendments;
      - Review of electoral laws, electoral systems and professional management of election administration;
      - Applying laws guaranteeing basic freedoms;
      - Developing and strengthening states in performance of their functions with mechanisms of accountability;
      - Clarifying the role of parliaments in relation to governments;

   B. Enhance governance transparency and accountability by a more effective separation of powers and the strengthening of the “countervailing powers” within a democratic constitutional framework:
      - Ensuring the independence and the efficiency of judiciary institutions;
      - Strengthening the evolution of an authentic civil society;
      - Enhancing education; increasing levels of literacy; developing political culture;
      - Strengthening roles of syndicates, unions, independent media and political parties and introducing statutes for opposition parties;

   C. Increase the participation of citizens in public life:
      - Developing a democratic culture with focus on dialogue, teamwork, and internal democracy in all forms of family and associational life;
      - Providing equal opportunities for women; increasing women’s political impact;
      - Encouraging youth participation in public issues;
      - Including all marginalized groups in political processes;

   D. Link economic reform to political reform, and development to democracy:
      - Decentralization and good governance and local development;
      - Insuring social and economic policies providing necessary services and needs;
      - Fighting corruption in public life and monitoring public expenditures;
      - Encouraging economic development on the micro and macro levels to insure a fair distribution of wealth;
E. Roles of the international community in the region:

- Interests have been pursued in many cases at the expense of democratic development;
- Globalization is without global democratic decision-making, and its economic impact on poor countries has been devastating;
- Positive dynamics are expected from the “Barcelona Process” and other co-operative processes taking place in the region.

2. Comparative advantages of International IDEA:

*International IDEA has many comparative advantages in the Arab region in furthering democratic reform processes. The most important are:*

- Credibility through International IDEA’s mix of membership. Unlike many other organizations, the composition of International IDEA’s membership creates less “suspicion” or “political sensitivity” in the region
- A knowledge resource base, the facilitation of access to comparative experiences in democratic reform processes, and the opportunity to link expertise in the Arab region to the international networks of democracy experts.
- The impartiality needed to facilitate dialogues and space for reflection between governments and civil society in the Arab region. International IDEA’s integrity in the promotion of democracy is enhanced by the fact that it is not a funding agency.

3. Programme activities:

The activities that International IDEA may wish to undertake in co-operation with its network of resource persons in the Arab region are presented in the following three categories:

3.1 Programme Areas

3.1.1. Thematic workshops:

To strengthen the potential democratic reform processes and to encourage the formation of series of “best practices” in the Arab region, a number of targeted workshops should be undertaken on the main subjects identified. Priority could, for example, be given to either of the following subjects:

- electoral reform processes;
- decentralization and local governance;
- the relationship between democracy and poverty;
- the regulatory frameworks for state – civil society relations;
- participation of women in governance;
- constitutional reform processes.

It is suggested that regional workshops on each of the themes be facilitated with a strategic partner (source of expertise on the specific theme) in the Arab region. These workshops should include more than 20 resource persons from the Arab region, with possibly one or two international experts to widen horizons.

The number and sequencing of the workshops, their locations, participation, and programmes need to be determined in further consultations. Participants will be
expected to prepare “best practice” case studies on the theme of the workshops facilitating the envisaged outcome of the best practice publications.

The choice of location should consider the possibilities of choosing partners who may provide complementary benefits that will enhance the objectives of the joint programme.

The workshops are expected to result in:

a. Institutionalization of networks of expertise on the specific aspects of democratic reform processes and good governance;
b. The production and dissemination of “best practice” publications throughout the region;
c. Formation of a resource base of Arab expertise on democratic development and good governance as a basis for advice services within the Arab region and for links with international resource bases on democratic development and good governance;
d. Dissemination network of “best practice” publications and handbooks with options for democratic reforms and practice;
e. New initiatives for furthering the general objectives of the joint programme.

3.1.2. Facilitation of dialogue between state and civil society institutions:
The space for constructive dialogue concerning democratic reforms is lacking in many countries in the Arab region due to the centralized style of governance. International IDEA may be well positioned to facilitate low-key opportunities for the two “sides” to meet on concrete matters, such as constitutional and electoral reforms in order to bridge the divide and widen support for democratic reforms. While doing this, International IDEA will keep in mind that due to the history of foreign interventions in the region’s affairs, local actors are always suspicious towards International organizations. It is International IDEA’s challenge to gain confidence and prove neutrality and credibility.

3.1.3 Capacity-building programmes in individual countries:
Key stakeholders in the democratization process in Morocco indicated interest for a capacity building-programme.

Morocco has recently undergone important transitions within the political sphere. The opposition formed a government after winning the elections, and King Hassan was succeeded by his son, who has promised more democratization and socio-economic development. The government and the main institutions in the civil society sector share substantial commitment to further democratic reforms, providing fertile ground for International IDEA to consider venturing a country-programme. There is also an interest among International IDEA members and multilateral institutions to co-operate if such a programme is to be undertaken.

3.1.4 Case studies to be used for comparative approach with other regions:
The first example of activities under this chapter is “Lebanon after the war”. The study will focus on:
Analysing the Lebanese experience in reconstruction, political reconciliation, socio-economic development, and studying its positive and negative aspects in terms of democratization in the country;
- Examining the relationship between investment and grants and political processes;
- Drawing the lessons learned from this experience.

3.1.5 Translation of International IDEA’s handbooks for use in the Arab Region:
The translation, production and dissemination of relevant handbooks with options for democratic reform and practice in Arabic, such as the ACE (Administration and Cost of Elections data-base) multimedia publications will help providing governments, civil society and researchers with useful tools for their work in the area of democracy.

3.2 CONDUCIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR THE PROGRAMME
Whatever specific activities will be undertaken in the period to come, these activities will be supported by, and will benefit from, the development of relations with a number of important networks and the presence at profile enhancing regional events related to International IDEA’s mandate.

3.2.1. Network and local alliances
- Development of an informal network of the participants to the round table and resource persons identified during the visits to the regions;
- Links with the Research and Policy Centres network in the region;
- Links with other professional networks in the region important for the advancement of democracy, including NGO networks, Independent Media network, academia, and electoral commissions and civic education organizations.

3.2.2. International actors in the Arab World with whom International IDEA wishes to collaborate:
- UNDP, ESCWA and other multi-lateral institutions;
- EU (importance of the Barcelona process);
- Bi-lateral agencies of International IDEA member states;
- International IDEA’s associate members such as ICJ, TI, IFJ, PGA, IPU and IPI;
- The major foundations working in the region.

3.3 WIDENING COVERAGE OF THE REGION
As opportunities arise, International IDEA will aim to gradually expand to cover more countries in the Arab region. The possibilities of incorporating more countries in this programme will depend on the assessment of the developments and changes in the region, on the experience gained in the implementation of the activities outlined in the framework, and, perhaps foremost, on International IDEA’s capacity to manage a further expansion.

Over time, International IDEA’s objectives and methodology should become better understood by key stakeholders in the Arab region. Assuming experiences will be
positive on both sides, further momentum for the activities identified in this framework can be expected to develop.

With regard to internal and external factors (such as geographical, political, cultural and socio-economical dynamics), countries such as Algeria, Palestine, Kuwait and Bahrain could become potential areas for capacity-building programmes in the future.
ABOUT INTERNATIONAL IDEA

Objectives
Created in 1995 by 14 countries, International IDEA promotes and advances sustainable democracy and improves and consolidates electoral processes world-wide. It provides a forum for discussion and action among individuals and organizations involved in democracy promotion. Global in ownership and scope, independent of specific national interests, and flexible and quick in its responses, International IDEA is the only international organization with this unique mandate.

Members
According to its Statutes, membership of International IDEA is open to governments and inter-governmental organizations. There are currently 19 member-states: Australia, Barbados, Belgium, Botswana, Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, Denmark, Finland, India, Mauritius, Namibia, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, and Uruguay. In addition, associate membership is open to international non-governmental organizations. There are currently five associate members: International Federation of Journalists, International Press Institute, Parliamentarians for Global Action, the Inter-American Institute for Human Rights and Transparency International. International IDEA also has formal agreements and co-operates closely with Switzerland, International Commission of Jurists, Inter-Parliamentary Union, the United Nations development Programme, and the Inter-American Development Bank.

Action
International IDEA:
- Promotes and advances sustainable democracy world-wide.
- Helps countries build capacity to develop democratic institutions.
- Provides a meeting-place for and facilitates dialogue between democracy practitioners around the world.
- Increases knowledge about elections and election observation.
- Promotes transparency, accountability, professionalism, and efficiency in elections in the context of democratic development.
- Develops and promotes norms, rules and guidelines that apply to multi-party pluralism and democratic processes.

Contact:
International IDEA, Information Division,
Strömsborg 103 34 Stockholm, Sweden
tel: +46 8 698 3700, fax: +46 8 20 24 22
e-mail: info@idea.int
website: http://www.idea.int
Secretariat
The Secretary-General is Bengt Säve-Söderbergh. The Institute, based in Strömsborg, Stockholm, has 60 staff members from about 30 different countries.

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Ms Aung San Suu Kyi
General Secretary of the National League for Democracy in Burma and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate.