

TESTIMONY TO THE
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Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I want to especially commend the Chair for convening these hearings. You have for many years brought tremendous U.S. leadership on issues of foreign policy, and your stewardship is greatly appreciated.

Like many other organizations, the International Republican Institute (IRI) has been giving more and more attention to the issue of democracy in the Middle East and Central Asia since the events of September 11, 2001. This effort amplifies programs undertaken for over a decade before 9/11; IRI's first involvement in the region came immediately after the first Gulf War, in Kuwait. Throughout the 1990s, IRI undertook democracy work in Kuwait, Oman, Morocco, and the West Bank.

What has changed since 9/11 is the level of sustained attention being given to the topic and the level of resources being devoted to Middle Eastern and Central Asian democracy. The reason democracy support in the Middle East and Central Asia is so important at this time, however, is that local reformers truly believe things can change and that meaningful political reforms can take hold, whereas four years ago few probably did.

The recent election in Iraq - an expression of Iraqis' popular will and desire for democratic and accountable government against what remain very difficult circumstances - has helped embolden reformers across the region and given them reason to believe democracy is also possible in their countries. I believe Palestinian Authority presidential elections and those in Ukraine have played a critical role strengthening democratic reform efforts in the Middle East and Central Asia- largely by way of giving local reformers hope and courage.

I also believe that that the Bush Administration is on the right track with respect to supporting political, economic and social reform in the Middle East. Increased attention to reform, democracy and human rights in both words and deeds is helping those in the Middle East committed to democratic change, and it is helping IRI support them. The road is an uphill one, and I believe it will remain so for the foreseeable future. But President Bush has removed the taboo of talking and pressing for democratic reform in the Middle East. While it may be too early to describe what is happening as an "Arab Spring," as some are, one cannot help but be optimistic about the changes that have continued in Qatar, Bahrain, and Morocco, changes under way in Lebanon, Iraq, and Algeria, and the first movements forward in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

On some tracks I think reforms will move forward quickly. In the economic and social spheres you are seeing this with bilateral free trade agreements being signed between the U.S. and Morocco and the U.S. and Bahrain, or with the overhaul of education curriculum, as has been done in Qatar. In these cases there is widespread acceptance by decision makers in the region of the failures of the past and a willingness to enact change quickly both because it is not that difficult to do and because there are immediate material benefits that are expected from reforms.

Political reform is more difficult. Advocates of political reform in the region are dealing with decades of undemocratic practices and deeply entrenched personalities and interests that feel threatened by reform. While there exists the potential for things to change overnight, I think the more likely scenario is that governing systems will change over time – if there is a continued commitment by the U.S. Government to place democracy and human rights high on the list of issues in speaking with governments in the region. I say this because when you talk about innovative initiatives like the U.S. Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) or the Broader Middle East Initiative and look for “success stories” and impact, there inevitably is a tendency to want immediate results. In thinking about this, I would advise everyone to look back to Serbia or Ukraine, countries where IRI, among others, was engaged for 7 to 10 years before the “overnight” victories of the people against corrupt governments. Democracy support is a long-term investment but we know that, almost without exception, such support combined with diplomatic commitment works. History shows that, whether you are talking about this year in Iraq, or last December in Ukraine, a decade ago in South America, South Korea or South Africa, when people are given a genuine choice about how they want to be governed, they will choose democracy. I believe the people of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the republics of Central Asia are also interested in accountable and representative governance.

Thanks to the State Department’s MEPI, IRI is able to provide that democratic support in the region in ways we could not in the 1990s. Essentially, IRI, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), Freedom House, Internews, American Bar Association (ABA) and others are implementing, on a daily basis, in ways diplomats cannot, the President’s policy of backing democrats in the Middle East. The additional funding provided through MEPI is critical because it enables IRI to do a lot more in the places where we are using funds— funding far beyond that which can be provided by our traditional, core source of support the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). At present, MEPI funding supports country specific IRI programs in Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan and Qatar, as well as a women’s regional program. At the most basic level though, I would say MEPI is having a direct positive benefit on IRI’s democracy support mission because it is enabling us to think much more strategically about where and how we want to support democratic reform in the Middle East. In a country like Morocco, for instance, a place where IRI has been active since the late 1990s, our program has gone from being a limited pilot project with a local council in Casablanca to a program that is targeting many communities in the Casablanca region to produce a citizen initiated development plan for use by elected local councils and associations. With a fully functional office in Casablanca, we are also able

to train political party activists and working with party leaders to help them improve platforms and strategies, largely through use of public opinion polling. Jordan is another place where IRI's work has benefited from the MEPI initiative. The Institute has a history of working in Jordan but in the past, resources and programs were largely driven by a specific event like an election. This made it extremely difficult for the Institute to plan and implement a comprehensive strategy of democracy support. With MEPI funds, we have been able to open an in-country office, enabling us to engage on a daily basis political activists and elected officials at the local and national levels. In doing so we are helping to put democracy policy rhetoric into practice by reaching out to reformers and supporting their endeavors in a comprehensive, meaningful way.

IRI's work in Morocco, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, and elsewhere in the region goes to the heart of MEPI's importance, because the "battle for hearts and minds" in the Middle East really is also about changing public attitudes about America, and demonstrating that we do in fact care about people in the region; that we care about the way their governments treat them, about whether their economies are growing at a pace fast enough to generate sufficient jobs, and about whether such opportunities are available to all members of society. It is critically important therefore that MEPI continue to be a U.S. Government program, and not, as some have suggested, an effort outside the government. Democrats in the Middle East who for many years felt ignored by the U.S. Government now must see the U.S. Government, including through U.S. nongovernmental organizations (NGO), coming to their aid.

It is also important to understand that while U.S. policy in the region has changed to place greater emphasis on democracy and human rights promotion, the bureaucracy within the State Department, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and elsewhere is still catching up with the Administration's direction in implementing this policy shift. All elements of our foreign policy apparatus, including Embassies overseas and within the Near Eastern Affairs Bureau at the State Department need to be constructively engaged to ensure that democracy remains a priority and that both governments and citizens in the Middle East are given a consistent message about the need to implement reforms. In closed societies such as Saudi Arabia and Syria, involvement at a diplomatic level is critical. The task of groups like IRI in an authoritarian country is rendered infinitely more difficult if it must be undertaken without the support of the U.S. Embassy. U.S. policymakers must take the lead in pressing for the greater political space in which IRI and other NGOs can operate.

Finally, it is important that you in Congress continue to travel to the region, continue to give praise where praise is due for moving forward on democracy, and continue to condemn bad practices as warranted.

CENTRAL ASIA

Central Asia offers a not dissimilar set of democratization issues as the Middle East. As in the Middle East, governing practices range from the somewhat liberal to some of the most repressive on earth. U.S. efforts to advance democracy and human rights in the region accelerated greatly after 9/11 -- and have already had a dramatic effect -- but the region has not

received the same amount of attention as the Middle East. There is also less unity within the Bush Administration regarding the priority placed upon democratization and human rights. MEPI has served the Middle East well; what is needed now is a Muslim World Partnership Initiative that will do the same for other areas from Nigeria to Indonesia, with an emphasis on Central Asia.

With the exception of Kazakhstan, the region offers little trade and investment opportunity due to high levels of corruption, geography, Soviet-era trade laws and lack of contract law. All Central Asian countries have a unitary form of government under which the president has the powers of decree, the power to appoint regional leaders, and with the exception of Kyrgyz Republic, the power to appoint some portion of the national legislature. In addition, Russia continues to wield significant influence in these countries. Russian is still widely spoken, Russian T.V. and media are major sources of information, and many Central Asians migrate to Russia to find employment. In a poll IRI conducted in Kazakhstan in July 2004, 91 percent of respondents cited Russia as the country's most important partner. This would not be an issue, except that the example of Russia's diminishing democratic practices is looked to by most governments in the region.

It is no exaggeration to say that Central Asia had, by the late 1990s, become a backwater for U.S. diplomacy. Other than a visit by Secretary Madeline Albright in 2000 and an interest in Kazakhstan's oil, the region received little attention from U.S. policymakers until just after 9/11. When it became apparent that any U.S. invasion of Afghanistan would have to go through the region, its importance was greatly magnified.

With the debate inside the Administration over post-9/11 U.S. democracy and human rights policy settled by early 2002, the region's practices on democracy and human rights also became a focus for the Administration. As Secretary Colin Powell put it at the time, "American troops come with values." All of the U.S. Ambassadors in the region began more active diplomacy on democracy (here particular credit is due to John O'Keefe in Kyrgyzstan, John Herbst in Uzbekistan and Larry Napper in Kazakhstan and Laura Kennedy in Turkmenistan). U.S. funding for democracy programs in the region dramatically increased in the years after 9/11, doubling in some countries and quadrupling in others. More importantly, the focus of new and existing programs was greatly sharpened; for example, the programs most frequently mentioned as helping Kyrgyzstan's recent transition (Freedom House's printing press, NDI's information centers and IRI's political party program) were all begun soon after 9/11 with funding by the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor.

The outlook for other Central Asian countries varies. Having been in the region during the Rose Revolution, however, there is a common element -- a belief by the authoritarians in the region that allowing democratic practices, particularly free elections, would result in a mob-led revolution. Obviously, this belief has intensified following events in Ukraine, and, closer to home, the downfall of the Kyrgyz government. The remaining autocrats in the region have failed to understand that in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan, it was not elections, but stolen elections that led to the sitting government's ouster.

In Kazakhstan, President Nazarbaev recently announced a “national program of political reforms” that will gradually introduce the election of regional governors and city mayors. However, this program deflects attention from other deficiencies such as recent parliamentary elections that the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe described as falling short of international standards of free, fair and transparent. IRI’s assistance has focused on political party strengthening and candidate training for local and parliamentary elections. Percentages of candidates with party affiliation increased greatly during the last three years, and IRI has been optimistic that steady progress was being made. In truth, regressive tendencies and administrative interference with some of the parties have become more common in the past year. IRI and other U.S. NGOs in Kazakhstan are presently facing intense government scrutiny and harassment, which is hindering programming and does not bode well for the future. This scrutiny, which increased after the controversial Ukraine presidential election, is likely to intensify given last month’s popular uprising against President Akaev in neighboring Kyrgyz Republic.

Uzbekistan remains one of the most difficult of the more than four dozen countries in which IRI works. President Karimov controls the country through a law enforcement structure and arbitrary application of the law. The President tolerates no political dissent. In general, Uzbekistan operates on a Soviet-era model of centralized power and administrative command, but with no social ideology to buffet the system. This has created fertile ground for the appeal of radical Islam, which sees opportunity in the ideological and economic poverty that prevails in the country’s regions. The Karimov administration has effectively restricted the party building and democracy education programming of international NGOs like IRI in ways that are contrary to the U.S.-Uzbekistan Bilateral Agreement.

Turkmenistan is the most repressive government in the region. The cult of personality surrounding the President, and attitudes towards any form of pluralism, is reminiscent of Stalinist Russia or early Maoist China. Engaging dissidents with democratic ambitions in Turkmenistan is all but impossible.

Throughout the region, the Bush Administration – in a unified manner -- needs to continue to engage key members of the governments with the message that our relationship cannot be based on security concerns alone. There is a genuine demand for IRI’s technical support throughout the country, but without continued backing from the U.S. Embassy and the State and Defense Departments here in Washington, IRI will not be able to work with democratic-oriented reformers in the future. In order to meet Central Asia’s demand for democracy assistance, the U.S. must encourage the region’s leaders to adhere to the letter and spirit of bilateral agreements. The U.S. must through public diplomacy explain U.S. support for political and economic reform in the region. It is imperative that civil society activists understand that the United States is currently backing democratically-oriented group that encourages citizen participation. This fact is sometimes lost on pro-democracy groups who have little access to accurate news and information and who are encouraged to feel isolated by their government. If this perception persists, radical Islamists are ready to feel the void, and U.S. foreign policy will face yet another far-flung and dangerous front in the war on terrorism.

In essence, American policy in Central Asia would benefit from the kind of comprehensive approach undertaken towards the Middle East. Just four years ago, we were continuing a half century of ignoring democracy and human rights in the Near East, believing that such an approach would guarantee our security. With some notable exceptions, few in the U.S. government had any interest in advancing American principles in the region. Today, just a few short years later, our policy has already begun to have an effect in terms of political openings, and to pay dividends in terms of perceptions of America in the region. Our policy towards Central Asia – and the rest of the Muslim world, from Nigeria to Indonesia – would benefit from a similarly top down, unambiguously enunciated policy, a Muslim World Partnership Initiative.