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The Role of the West in Internal Political Developments of the Arab Region

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External factors have been and still are a decisive factor in shaping internal political developments of the Arab region. Over the past two centuries, radical changes always came as a result of western pressure. Today, the crucial question revolves around how legitimate western intervention can be in light of the blatant failure of the US and its western allies to export democracy either in Iraq or Afghanistan. The West should limit its support to the moral and political dimensions of the political transition in the Arab states, but should not exclude resorting to some coercive means such as conditional linkage. Western recent actions reflect a lack of understanding of Middle-Eastern complexities and renewed complacency vis-à-vis authoritarian practices. The West must realize that opposition movements are peaceful for now, but if they are suppressed, there is no guarantee that the next wave of opposition will remain committed to a peaceful path. The Egyptian example shows that the basic concern of the US is not about democracy or non-democracy but about Islamists or non-Islamists. The only way to restrain Islamist forces is to allow them to participate in a full-fledged democracy, but the inclusion of Islamist movements in the democratic process should be left to domestic forces as an internal matter.

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It is quite difficult to analyze the political situation in the Arab world, indeed in the entire Islamic world, in isolation from external factors. The crucial question revolves around how legitimate it is to speak of western penetration, in particular with regard to the internal political developments of the Arab region. In this regard, the historical dimension is of great importance.

From the middle of the 19th Century, when the decline of the Ottoman Empire was in full swing, until today, it is impossible to explain the developments taking place in the Arab and Islamic world in isolation from the European world and from external interference. I don't subscribe to the ideas of the "Dependency School," which explains everything in the Third World in terms of the economic interests of the West. My perspective is political, based on actual facts.

Likewise, it is not possible to explain the emergence of the Arab entities in isolation from the implications of colonialism. Colonialist policy and intervention created the modern Arab state entities such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and so on. The European role in supporting the Great Arab Revolt of Sharif Hussein against the Turks is well known, as is the European support of the project to establish the Saudi state, it is also impossible to dismiss the fact that Britain and the other European powers came in with their plan to partition Palestine and set up Israel in the heart of the Arab world. Moreover, it was Britain that came up with the idea of the Arab League. Claims that Arab nationalist struggles could explain the emergence of the Arab League must be looked at for what they really are worth. Britain actually wanted to establish a sort of balance, offsetting the creation of Israel in Palestine. In fact, London triggered the process by initiating the Balfour Declaration, followed by Churchill who adopted the Arab League project.

Thus it is impossible to separate internal developments in the Arab region from the impact of colonialist activities on the one hand and from western activities on the other.

The Egyptian example

If we take Egypt as an example insofar as its domestic developments are concerned, we will find that the impact of the external factor was sweeping. Egypt was a colony or rather a protectorate of Britain when the First World War broke out, and wartime conditions set back the country's internal development. What encouraged the Egyptian national movement in its demand for independence after World War I was the Declaration of the Fourteen Points of US President Woodrow Wilson issued at the end of the war. The nationalist leader Sa'd Zaghlul asked to travel to Paris at the head of an Egyptian Delegation to attend the peace conference there and to call for the implementation of Wilson's ideas in Egypt. When Britain refused, the response of the Egyptian people was to rise in the 1919 Revolution that cannot be explained without reference to these international developments.

In fact, all the political forces that began to appear at the end of this period were influenced by external factors. This does not mean that the influence only came from the colonial state. For example, when the Caliphate in Turkey collapsed, the reaction in Egypt was the formation of the Muslim Brotherhood organization. When fascist ideas emerged in Italy and Germany, fascist forces took shape in Egypt in the form of the "Young Egypt" (Misr al-Fatat) party and the like. A few years after the Communist revolution took place in Russia in 1917, the Egyptian Communist Party was formed. As a result of the Treaty of 1936 and the developments taking place in Egyptian society under the semi-liberal regime, new middle class elements in large numbers enrolled in the military and it was they who later formed

the Free Officers Movement. And is it possible to deny the huge effect that the 1948 War in Palestine – which in fact was entirely a foreign product – had on the subsequent development of Egyptian politics? Indeed is it possible to explain the success of the Free Officers Movement without reference to British and American interests at that particular time? After the Second World War, the United States inherited the British colonial mantle and became the hegemonic power in the region, its interests governing political developments there. US post-War interests crystallized around three things: protecting Israel, securing oil supplies, and preventing Communist control over the region.

None of these goals required the presence of democratic regimes. They required strong regimes that were able to resist the Communist threat and the dangers that surrounded the petroleum resources. Accordingly, the weakness of the old monarchic regime in Egypt and its inability to cope with the threat coming from such new social and political forces as the Muslim Brotherhood or the Communists disturbed the United States. Therefore Washington encouraged the Free Officers to carry out their revolution. Without this encouragement, they would not have been able to succeed. It is very well known that the Free Officers contacted the US embassy in Cairo to reassure it about their action and to neutralize the British position. And in fact, although there were 70,000 British troops in Egypt, they did not intervene to halt the coup of 23 July 1952. The Americans subdued King Faruq and US Ambassador Jefferson Caffery asked him to submit to the Free Officers and advised him to leave for Italy. The era of the Egyptian monarchy came to an easy end because Britain and the United States wanted so at that time.

The 1952 regime thus came to power in Egypt. The July Revolution cannot be explained only in terms of the discontent of the army. It is also undeniable that foreign powers also wanted this

revolution to take place. Their assessment was precise and correct if we look at the role that Gamal Abdel Nasser went on to play, excluding the Communists from exercising any real influence in the region. The Nasserist ideology kept Arab Communists under control in a situation that continued until the fall of the Soviet Union. Nasserism was the only way that Arab Communist movements could be kept in check.

In sum, the impact of the external factor on the internal situation is one of the political realities of the region. We are not discussing here whether this is a good or a bad thing; merely noting that it is a fact. If this was the case in Egypt where there was a government with its own political aims, what of the role played by external factors in the establishment of the Saudi regime and in supporting Saudi Arabia, particularly after the discovery of oil? And the British role in shaping events in the Gulf and in setting the ruling families on their thrones is too obvious to require further proof.

Furthermore, can it be denied that the battles between Nasser and the West had an impact on the whole destiny of the Nasser regime? It was those battles that led to the 1967 War and it was the defeat that had such an effect on the internal political situation in Egypt thereafter. Is it possible to deny that US support for Anwar Sadat later rescued the Egyptian regime? The US aid that began to flow into the Egyptian treasury after the Camp David peace agreement, which Sadat received for a year or two, and which continued thereafter under Mubarak, played a major role in bolstering the Egyptian regime, particularly considering that it amounted to more than two billion dollars a year.

The Cultural Impact

In this context it is completely logical that cultural life in the Arab world should be heavily

influenced by external factors, based on values and ideas, as well as the general debate generated by sensitive political issues. At least in the last 50 years, the basic political orientations that were predominant in the area cannot be separated from developments on the world scene. The cultural influence of the left was far greater than its political influence. The left has played an important role in literature, journalism, artistic production such as the Arab cinema, a role much more important than it has played in politics. Naturally, this was linked to the growth of the Communist camp and the Soviet Union. It is true that Egyptian and Arab intellectuals who have been greatly influenced by leftist thought have had a major impact on the political situation as well. The fact that democracy and the democratic model have been linked with the American and European models afforded a golden opportunity to dictatorial regimes to oppose this model on the grounds that it is a European and American product. That was one of the factors that impelled a populist leader like Nasser to seek Communist support despite the fact that he had no sympathy with Communism whatsoever. The reason is simple: namely that the economic and political model represented by the Communist movement and Soviet state was different from, and indeed in conflict with, the model that was identified in the minds of intellectuals and the Arab elite with European colonialism. But the interpenetration of these factors in the end had a negative influence, as, unfortunately, they did not place the Arab world on the right path to historical transition.

Can western pressure help bring about democratic transformation?

There always were forces in Arab society that were pressing for democracy in confrontation with undemocratic, authoritarian regimes. Let us go back to the Egyptian model. The practice of Egyptian democracy before the 1952 revolution had grown so full of flaws that it was

no longer able to face down populism and demagoguery. But the failure meted out to the Egyptian experiment in 1967 constituted an extremely important lesson regarding the lack of democracy, even if this lesson was brought home to the elite and not to the people.

There is, in any case, an important observation that needs to be made in this regard. Every time some great disaster befell the Arab Region, Arab intellectuals and members of the elite bewailed the lack of democracy. This kind of re-examination took place after the 1948 war. The writings of Constantine Zurayq, among many others, singled out the absence of freedom as being one of the reasons for the disaster. But unfortunately, as soon as we learn, we forget, and democracy and freedom disappeared after that once again. When the 1967 defeat occurred in Nasser's time, talk once again turned to the lack of democracy and the absence of freedom. Another disaster followed, not in one full swoop as in 1967, but by gradual accumulation. Today we are suffering from a setback no less disastrous than that of 1967, and once again we find that the basic reason for it is the absence of democracy.

Just as the demand for democratic transformation has always come after disasters and setbacks, there is now, following the two Gulf Wars, pressure for democratization. The truth of the matter is that from the 1950s to the 1990s, the neither United States nor Europe or the outside world in general, supported any real democratic aspirations in the Arab Region, since their interests were not served by such aspirations. America's interest was to preserve oil supplies and Israel's security, and fight Communism. Washington did not want democratic regimes in the region; it wanted strong regimes. So long as such regimes were in place, the US had no problem. The concern of Americans for establishing democracy among us did not go beyond declarations and crude propaganda. It consisted of little more than empty slogans about the need for freedom

and democracy. That never translated into pressure for democratization in the country. Accordingly, in Egypt, for example, throughout the period following 1967, the movement for democracy remained confined to the elite. It was not a popular movement nor, at the same time, did it encounter any sort of support from abroad.

So, when was the turning point? This came about for reasons that have nothing to do with democracy. It had to do with the fall of the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s, the subsequent rising fear in the US of the Islamic fundamentalist danger, and the emergence in 1993-1994 of the notion of a clash of civilizations. September 11, 2001, transformed it into a top priority, as the Americans realized that the issue of democracy (or lack thereof) in the Arab region could be the source of many of the existing problems.

For the first time in 2001, there was an external factor pressing for democracy. For Egypt, it occurred after 50 years of needing such a factor, at a time when the regime had become corroded with age and a lengthy process of deterioration of its institutions, and internal pressure for reform and change was on the increase. There is no question that the response that came from the various Arab regimes, and the Egyptian regime in this case, was in the first place the result of external pressure. This in turn raises a key question, namely what kind of external pressure is needed? The existing regimes are very repressive and have acquired a level of experience in dealing with their peoples that has turned them into experts in keeping Arab societies in line.

The political situation might seem difficult to read or predict. The public agencies of the state are seriously decayed. They are obviously failing to deliver the basic services – such as education, housing, and healthcare – at the minimum level required. There is extensive unemployment. Yet at the same time, there is a

kind of public apathy. This situation can be explained by resorting to theories of revolution, the most popular of which is that of relative deprivation, according to which revolution takes place when there is a state of relative deprivation, not absolute deprivation. But the Egyptian youth today suffers from absolute deprivation. All the statistics indicate that a high percentage of the people live in very extreme poverty and that they are exhausted from the demands of daily life. There are, for example, several million Egyptians living under the poverty line and a similar number suffer from chronic diseases such as kidney failure due to the poor quality of the water. About seven million peoples are living in cemeteries. This all serves to demonstrate that the predominant portion of the Egyptian people is in a situation that renders them incapable of taking any action. For any citizen to revolt and oppose, he/she must first enjoy a minimum of social amenities and the physical ability to move and demonstrate. They cannot do this if they are in a state of complete weakness and emaciation. A second factor relates to the political culture of the Egyptian people, namely, that they do not readily get involved in a political activity. In spite of that, those same deprived Egyptians came out in massive demonstrations in 1967. I will never forget when I went out with the students of Cairo University in one of those demonstrations in 1967, a march that reached from Cairo University to the National Assembly. There were about half a million of us in the street. This happened again during the events of 18-19 January 1977 under Sadat's rule. There was relative dynamism within society, and this is one indication of what I have been saying, since the material conditions of the ordinary Egyptian citizen were better then than they are now. How can someone working 18 hours a day just to feed his children go out and demonstrate? How can he or she find time to exchange opinions with friends? Thus the domestic conditions are not the most propitious for what is called a revolutionary explosion. So we are not facing a

revolutionary situation. There is a condition of frustration; there is a split between the will of the elite that is calling for change and the apathy and indifference of the people.

In this situation, external pressure has added value. Something that explains and justifies the effects of such pressure is that the ruling elite serves the outside world's interest and is subservient to it. It has a sense that it derives its legitimacy from pleasing the outside world. Therefore any instructions, conditions or pressures from abroad have a definite practical effect. That brings us to the question of what the outside world can do. First of all, it can put pressure on the arbitrary regimes. Second, it can morally and politically encourage a movement of resistance. America's enormous material and political support to Egypt since 1974 was probably the one key factor that kept the regime strong. If that aid were cut off the result would be disastrous. The American administrations have played a part in keeping the regime in power, regardless of whether or not they acknowledge this fact. The question then is what kind of contribution can the United States make? Should it be military intervention, direct support in one form or another? I am certainly not calling for military intervention, but rather for support in the moral and political sense, namely that a clear, public and consistent stance be taken against undemocratic practices. Such a clear stance would encourage social movements that are demanding democracy. In other words, an intervention does not imply a new bold initiative. The US can merely use the influence it already has to exert pressure.

The issue of conditional linkage

It is well known that there is an ongoing debate in the West concerning conditional linkage, i.e. whether attaching conditions to aid can have a practical effect; and if so whether that effect will be positive or negative, and whether the

energies of the society will run out before those of the regime.

The fact is that the complexities of the regimes and their ability to maneuver are much greater than is imagined. While they themselves depend on America, they are the first to incite against America. Surprisingly, the rationale that guides America and Europe is not complex. They deal with issues with a rather simplistic approach. They do not understand the complexity and the tricks used in the Arab world and the East. This is the Orient! a world of relationships and complexities that westerners have difficulty grasping. What is going on in Iraq is a case in point; it has thrown them into confusion. Their expertise did not prepare them to envision the complexities latent in Iraq but which are present throughout the whole region. These are what could be called "cultural" factors, negative ones such as the underhandedness and double-dealing that are a common practice in our societies. The westerners have taken part in it to a great extent, for it was they who preserved and supported these regimes. The backward, conservative situation in the oil countries is not unrelated to the western governments' support for these orientations. They want to control oil supply and they want the Arab societies to remain quiet about it. They therefore strove to limit their natural growth. Under claims of respect for cultural specificity, there now coexist in Saudi Arabia gigantic buildings and modern installations together with repressed women in veils. In other words, if we imagine Saudi Arabia without oil, its society's doors would have opened up and the women there would have by now shed their veils.

The problem is that the oil revolution preserved this society and froze it in this condition, leaving it as a distorted society in every meaning of the word. This is something that can hardly be separated from the external factor.

Before slipping into the Iraqi quagmire, George Bush made a statement at the White House in

which he denounced the beating of Egyptian women demonstrators in front of the Journalists Association. That statement had a great moral effect on those people who are the most hostile to America, i.e., the leftists and Nasserites, who were very happy about it.

The existence of democracy restrains the Islamic forces

I acknowledge a big mistake I used to make: I used to feel strongly that the Americans assess and understand issues very well. Naturally, this is not true all the time. But more than that, sometimes they understand issues very superficially and simplistically and make terrible mistakes. For example, their basic concern is over political Islam and the danger of the Muslim Brotherhood. Some of my American interlocutors - such as Madeleine Albright or Richard Haass - expressed themselves in favor of a democracy that could involve the risk that Islamists might take power, at least for a short period of time. But that is not the case for the majority of American researchers and writers whose great fear is the Islamists. Personally, I am a liberal and I hate any form of interference of religion in politics. But I am certain that the problem today is not about Islamists or non-Islamists; it is the problem of democracy or non-democracy. The one thing that will put limits on the Islamists is if they have to go public and voice clearly their ideas.

One of the obvious political realities in this region is that Islamist forces have flourished as a direct result of dictatorial governments and the lack of democracy.

Even if free, democratic elections bring non-democratic forces to the fore, I am convinced that it will only be over a short term. But most Americans do not believe that, and this is the amazing and saddening point in their thinking. If a genuinely democratic regime arose in Egypt it would be impossible for the Islamists

to get more than 30 percent at most of the vote. In the last elections of 2005 the Islamists won 88 seats in the parliament – representing 80 percent or 90 percent of their maximum potential. All those who supported the Islamists voted in those elections, while 70 percent of the Egyptians did not participate in the ballot. A quick estimation will show that 90 percent of the latter have no connection to the Islamists. Fear of the Islamists has produced a tendency to exaggerate and over-estimate their influence.

Furthermore, there is nothing to indicate that the political commitment of the Islamists is confined to stage one of democracy, i.e., the stage that will bring them to power!

In the last Palestinian elections, some took the position that it was a mistake to boycott the Islamists, while others contended that it was a mistake to allow them into the electoral process in the first place, if the Oslo Agreement was to be considered as the legitimate and preconditioned framework to which all the political forces must be committed. In other words, if it were a precondition, then it would have been necessary to ban Hamas from the elections from the start. In any case, the people voted for Hamas out of hatred for the corruption of Fatah. The political weakness of the Palestinian elite was its inability to expose the blatant double standard of Hamas – for how could they enter the elections under Israeli supervision, under the guidance and organization of the Israeli leadership, and in the framework of Oslo, without recognizing Israel? The entire discussion about the recognition or non-recognition issue is silly anyway. It would have been better to sidestep it and leave Hamas to face the consequences of its position. The statements issued by the European Union saying that they – the representatives of Hamas – entered the Legislative Council on the basis of the working of Oslo and therefore are bound by the agreement - were unclear to the Palestinian population.

In Egypt too, a fundamental part of the success of the Islamists is not because people are attracted by their ideas so much as it is due to the corruption of the other political forces. For example, one of the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood was quoted as saying that in one of the provinces of the Delta, the Muslim Brotherhood has 400 formal members only. But in the elections, the Brotherhood won 40,000 votes there! The Islamists' greatest reserve of strength is the dictatorial regime itself and the corruption of the ruling system. When the society really opens up, the issue will be completely transformed.

This brings us to another common concern, namely the fear that if the Islamists come to power they will change the constitution. The answer to this is that the democratic system provides the means for it to protect itself in such a way that no one can use the system to change the constitution. Out of place is the idea that is being widely circulated in the West calling for a dialogue with the Islamists in order to secure a guarantee from them that they will abide by democratic principles. What is directly needed is for them to support the democratic process as a whole. A dialogue with the Islamists is an internal matter. At issue today is the construction of a real democratic system. That is the priority, and then the democratic framework will automatically keep the Islamists in line. If after that first step, some national dialogue is to take place, then it should be a dialogue involving everyone: the Islamists, the Nasserites, the Socialists, and the Liberals.

Training in democracy?

Some western organizations are inclined to undertake activities aimed at strengthening and training the political parties. In my opinion this is very much a secondary matter. What is needed at this stage is political support so that the government will think one thousand times before repressing the masses or beating them up

in the street, or before it bans any meeting or lets some trifling little party go on making its declarations while it refuses to let a real, significant political party function even when all the legal requirements have been met and all the documents, programs, and names of founders have been turned in as is legally required.

In such cases, the international organizations should be exposing what is going on and using such arbitrary practices to demonstrate the actual absence of democracy. All that is needed is a guarantee of this sort; nothing more. We are not talking about "support" in the sense of any kind of military intervention, and we do not need financial support. We need political support so that we can feel that there exist abroad – not only in America or Europe, but throughout the world – international organizations, human rights organizations that are standing beside us. This not only gives people a sense of moral support, it makes the government think twice before it takes any action.

Political and moral support should be given to any party, whatever its orientation, so long as it respects legal means and is committed to democracy. What is important is that the issue of democratic reform becomes clear in people's minds as a cause based on principles. But American methods have been completely different from this. Besides their foolish position on Hamas, they are taking disgraceful, opportunistic positions, such as the stance they are taking on the regime of Mu'ammarr al-Qadhafi who repressed democratic freedoms and insulted the Libyan people. But when he became their friend, they started dealing with him without making any references to his tyranny and without a glance at the Libyan opposition. What scares the Egyptian and the Arab elites is the rampant political opportunism of US policy. It is obvious that the problems the US is facing in Iraq and Afghanistan have an impact on their approaches. There is also, I

believe, a certain inability to set priorities. For if more serious efforts were made to support democratic reforms in Egypt to the extent of one one-thousandth of the American effort being made in Iraq, there would be a positive impact on the entire Arab region. I am referring here to moral support, basically, and not to military intervention or financial backing. It is surprising to observe the inability to define and pursue goals effectively, which is not in keeping with the general image of expertise and competence that we associate with the Americans. Their misfortune in Iraq is evidence of their poor preparation and proof that they have not understood anything. In addition, they are entirely unclear about priorities. For if the issue in US politics was the spread of democracy across the Arab world, then the most basic question that would follow would be, where do you begin? Do you begin with the most difficult and intractable situation? By its nature, Iraq is a society that is difficult to manage, as is the Iraqi nationalist identity. The sharp divisions between the components of that society, between the Shi'a, the Sunni, and the Kurds, make Iraq the most difficult place in which to implement democracy.

In Egypt however, it would be possible to spread democracy with some well-studied political pressure and persuasion. This would have had a positive impact on the entire region. But there is not much thought being given to this option, and nothing to be learned from the American research centers' outputs and recommendations. Throughout its history, Egypt has been a lighthouse for the surrounding regions. Yet, the Americans remain prisoners of a silly scenario that focuses on fears of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamists.

Just as it is impossible to under-estimate the importance of external support and interactive relations with the outside world as a basic feature of the region, it is likewise from the other side: can the Americans do without oil? Their interests are deeply buried in this Arab land, and their political presence, inevitable as

it is, must be constructive and in keeping with the hopes of its peoples.

The difference between Europe and America

America has the power to put real pressure on the region – military, moral, economic, etc. But if Europe and America stood together to support the cause of political democracy, this would have a huge impact. Is it reasonable, for example, for the White House to act when women are beaten in front of the Journalists Union in Cairo, while France, the land of freedom and democracy, remains silent, or makes do with an official statement issued by the spokesman of the French Foreign Ministry? This is what I mean by moral and political support from the governments, political parties, popular organizations and human rights groups. They must come to believe that spreading democracy in these countries and backing democratic forces is a cause that deserves their support. The material support that they provide to some institutions of the civil society remains a marginal issue. It might sometimes be helpful but is not significant.

The Americans say that they intend to fund Arab civil society organizations and are ready to invest the required 50 million dollars for that purpose in the framework of the Foundation for the Future. The Europeans might be considering the establishment of a Foundation for Democracy so that they can support civil society and political parties. But we all remember the story of the one million dollars that the US administration wanted to distribute to Egyptian civil society organizations after the Gulf War as one of its first concrete actions following George Bush's statements on democracy promotion. It caused a tremendous commotion. Despite the financial needs of the political parties and other civil society organizations in our region, which depend on contributions by members and supporters, most of whom are poor, these organizations and

parties cannot sacrifice their reputations for financial support, even though they might be in desperate need of it. In any case, democracy is not built on money and financial support remains a secondary matter. What builds democracy is the political support that can curb the state. Egypt is in a bad situation right now and the fact that things have deteriorated so far is neither in the interest of the Americans nor of the Europeans. More serious commitment to support democratic development through political and moral means is what is really needed.

It is often said that the priorities of the West have once again become dependent on stability and security, hence on supporting governments that ensure both, in particular strong governments, and that the West's interest in democracy has diminished. Such behavior will end up harming western strategic interests over the long run. The democratic forces in the region that are going to face greater difficulties and increasing suffering will not develop any sense of gratitude or love for the West and will never feel that they share its values. That means that their basic interests will be affected and that the feelings of hostility vis-à-vis the West and the outside world will grow stronger. If this hostility becomes predominant under democratic regimes with strong civil society movements, the situation will be much more dangerous than the hostility that we see today. Any rational assessment should impel the West to support the democratic movement in the Arab and Islamic World.

Westerners must understand that at this stage they are dealing with peaceful opposition movements. But should these movements be repressed once again, there is nothing to guarantee that the next wave of opposition will remain actually committed to that peaceful path. A new radicalism will enter the field and the collision is likely to be much more violent. So now is the best time to act. This situation is not limited to Egypt; it is true of Syria, Iraq,

Lebanon, Tunisia, the Sudan and others. This is the general climate. As far as I know the region, if a real democratic awakening takes place in Egypt, it will spill over to other Arab countries and the region as a whole. Therefore I emphasize the importance of supporting democratic transformation in Egypt. Continuing to support the regimes, taking a hesitant, politically opportunist approach defined by narrow interests will convince the peoples in the region that the West is not serious about democracy.

Egypt is ready. It can undergo a complete democratic transformation within two years. The Egyptian personality is not inclined to violence and is always ready to compromise. It readily accepts adjustment to new ideas. The Egyptians have a democratic tradition to be reckoned with and practice is what establishes this. If that were not so, how would it be that the Indians have a democratic culture? I saw people there living in miserable poverty but they know what the vote is and they respect it. In the last legislative elections in Egypt, the people in the remotest rural areas were determined to vote. The situation is not as dead as it might seem, on the contrary the people desire to accomplish something.

The speed of democratic transition and the role of the media

The current understanding of democracy differs from what it was 40 years ago. Globalization, satellite dishes, and the satellite networks have brought to the people an excellent understanding of these issues and this can be most helpful.

The Egyptian poor have some unique characteristics. An Egyptian might not buy a bed or a chair, and he certainly hasn't bought any refrigerator or cooker. He still cooks with kerosene. But he must buy a television. The Egyptians have a flaming interest in the media.

They are one of the Arab peoples who most highly value culture and information. There is a very strange phenomenon that one can see in the rural areas, one that yields wealth today, and that is that anybody who has a little money will buy a reception dish and the appliances for receiving satellite TV. The peasant pays two or three Egyptian pounds every month to be connected by cable. As there is no control on property rights in Egypt, anyone can be connected. This is having a tremendous impact and is one example of very simple and relatively cheap instruments of change.

I would also present the case of the US sponsored al-Hurrah TV station as an example. In the beginning, the station was the object of harsh attacks, but with time, it has become popular and influential. The provocative parliamentarian Talaat al-Sadat gave an interview to the al-Hurrah station that aroused people's interest and considerable debate. As the free media advance, democratic transformation becomes easier. For three or four years, the British have been thinking about setting up an Arabic BBC. Why have they delayed? And why aren't the French doing the same thing? Free media have constituted the most important and most influential factor in Egyptian political culture in recent years because it has become difficult for the government to control the media. Today there are new channels: Dream, al-Mihwar, Orbit, and al-Hurrah, in addition to al-Jazeera and al-'Arabiya. Let me just give a personal illustration of this with two programs. When I

raised my objections to the amendment of article 76 of the Constitution in 2005 and tendered my resignation, all of Egypt knew me from one program on Dream and a 10-minute interview. The medium of television equals a hundred political speeches and a thousand articles.

At the beginning, people had doubts about al-Hurrah and boycotted it because of its close connections with the Americans. But they themselves started to watch it because it brought something new. The same goes for the Lebanese channel LBC. So when a strong British station is set up in the Arabic language, and a French and German one in addition to al-Hurrah, the effect of that will go far beyond governments and will influence popular culture. These are costly projects in terms of investment criteria, though in terms of the strategic goals of any state, cost is not a consideration. Al-Jazeera - which was originally a project of the BBC, which the BBC then abandoned - has won a huge audience. Sometimes a crude Arab nationalist or Islamic orientation becomes dominant there, but it provides news services that are first rate.

The question is how can we help the people to listen and watch and understand? How can we open the doors so that they can breathe clean air? Not by money or military intervention, or anything like that. When the people begin to think correctly, then matters will take the correct course.