From the Desk of the Editor

It is claimed that states no longer have a sovereign right to be undemocratic. The entire globe has a stake in insuring that basic rights are provided for all human beings. Increasingly threats know no borders. The right of every individual to political and economic participation in a pluralistic environment is the best insurance we have to make the world safer.

Democratization needs to take place in the wider Middle East area. Not if, but how this will be achieved, in what time span and by which actors, are the questions being discussed in the current issue of TPQ. Conclusions from a conference held in Istanbul in June 2005 by the ARI Movement *"Democratization and Security in the Wider Middle East"* are also presented in these opening words.

The Middle East is not a homogeneous area. To consider it as such and to prescribe a uniform solution for problems in the area would be to dismiss the unique dynamics in each country. However there are some common challenges that are faced across the region. In addition, developments in one country affect surrounding countries due to multiple geographical, historical, cultural, economic, ethnic and religious links between societies. Just as backwardness can be contagious, positive change in one area of the region can provide a spark of inspiration and a ripple effect in others.

The ideal amount and form of international "pressure" or "assistance" for democratic transformation needs to vary from country to country, depending on existing domestic mechanisms and dynamics. However, zooming in too much on the peculiarities of each country can play into the hands of those clinging to the status quo in the region, who claim democratization will backfire and create environments less conducive to stability and liberalization. One question that arises frequently in this issue is: to what extent should special cases in the region be considered?

In the aforementioned conference, Ambassador Murat Bilhan, Chairman of the Center for Strategic Research, noted that in societies where traditional elements of change, such as NGOs and universities have been "choked," it is unrealistic to expect that democratization will be domestically driven. Rola Dashti, a leading women's rights activist and a chairman of Kuwait Economic Society, is against waiting for domestically driven transformation to take hold, explaining that words of reform were uttered for 150 years with no significant improvement in Kuwait. She argued that the rhetoric for gradual change has lost all credibility. On the other hand, Saed Taeb, from the Institute for Political and International Studies in Iran, claimed that intervention from abroad would be counterproductive to domestic reform efforts - an opinion shared by Bayram Sinkaya in his article on "U.S.-Iranian relations and Democratization in Iran." Süleyman Demirel cautions against provoking divisions in countries in order to topple dictators and bring about

democracy. Such rapid democratization formulas were referred to as "microwave democracy," by Ibrahim Al- Marashi during the ARI Movement Conference.

The relationship between security and democracy is undeniably a positive one, with one strengthening the likelihood of the sustainability of the other. This is not to say that a focus on one automatically ensures the other. Both need to be targeted in parallel, with small steps. The prevailing conviction is that at some point in the process a critical mass or tipping of the scales will occur after which a virtuous cycle will become self-propagating. Until that point is reached, it may appear that there is a choice between democracy and security. The question whether in some cases democracy and security are mutually exclusive is raised by a number of authors of this issue.

According to Nibras Kazimi, from the Hudson Institute in the U.S., dictatorships in the region have a symbiotic relationship with Islamic fundamentalists. In some societies, Islamic fundamentalism is the only channel for people who want change. Dictatorships exploit this to achieve the legitimacy they need by claiming that democracy is inherently dangerous and could empower fundamentalists. Democracy is a greater threat to both the regimes and the insurgents than they are to each other. However, it is necessary to distinguish between different types of Islamists. Are all Islamists inherently anti-freedom? Can Islamists enjoy a "contained" space in the democratic spectrum? Would anything but strict secularism be a threat to the uniting characteristic of democracy? What is the game plan if Islamists win elections? Are we capable of identifying and promoting a *healthy level of Islam?*

The role of the U.S. is special due to its unrivalled strength and American security interests in the region. On the other hand, there is widespread mistrust of the U.S. in the region. Since 9/11 the U.S. has had the will to carry out comprehensive and long term strategies in the region in a way that neither other countries, nor the EU have yet deemed necessary. In this sense, U.S. interests correspond with those of opposition groups struggling for reforms and in some cases regime change in Middle Eastern states. However, outright U.S. support is sometimes said to be more of a burden on domestic agents of change then it is a blessing.

Do we understand the Middle East, which we claim to have set out to aid and transform? In the case of Iraq, are Shiite clerics necessarily pro-Iran? What percentage of Iraqis actually voted thinking this would increase the likelihood that U.S. forces leave Iraq sooner rather than later? What will be the longer term consequences of all political parties in Iraq defining themselves along ethnic or sectarian lines? These are some of the questions Ibrahim Al- Marashi posed as he argued that common conceptions about the Middle East are imbued with many myths.

Turkey is considered, by friends further west, to have an inherent understanding

of the Middle East, due to geographical proximity, history and religion. However, just how true this is may be debatable. A number of participants from Turkey emphasized, in their interventions at the conference, that in fact there is little knowledge of the region generated in Turkey, concluding that the impression of Turkey's added value in terms of understanding the region does not have grounds. Yönet Can Tezel, from the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, disagreed, and argued that Turkey has a unique comparative advantage in relating to the region of its south, and in fact pursues effective policies. How Turkey's advantages are translated to concrete results was discussed in depth. Calls to Turkey for more vocal and symbolic support of democratic agents in neighboring nations were voiced loudly. On the other hand, Turkish civil society representatives called upon the government to share its vision and strategy for the region more clearly with domestic stakeholders.

At times it can appear that Turkey is rowing against the tide, in denial of inevitable change, including regime change, in neighboring states. At other times Turkey appears to be conducting a foreign policy in which it acts alone. Turkey is a neighbor, without the luxury of distancing itself from change along its borders. Does Turkey not have the conviction that democratic transformation is possible? If so, what is the source of Turkey's skepticism and what will the cost of it be? What alternatives does Turkey offer for democratization in the Middle East? What has Turkey done, as a neighbor, over the past decades to support democratization? Has Turkey's desire for stability and security triumphed over its desire to see its neighbor's enjoy the fruits of liberty? As these questions are raised, the changes in global approaches to such concepts are examined by Cengiz Çandar, in his article "Democracy in the Greater Middle East: Inevitable."

According to a number of Turkish participants to the conference, Turkey's Iraq policy collapsed partially because of the illusion that it could arrest developments there by pointing out the risks and refusing to back the effort. Instead of revising this approach and being accountable for its consequences, Turkey is continuing along similar lines in its Syrian policy. According to Farid Ghadry, President of the Reform Party of Syria, though high-level Turkish visits to Syria in the beginning of 2005 might have been well-intended, they conveyed the wrong message not only to the U.S. and Europe but, more importantly, to Syrian reformers. At the very worst juncture, when western leaders had joined forces to isolate the Assad regime, the visits gave highly symbolic messages of support for the Syrian regime. It is expected that Turkey will be even less able to take a stance against Iran's regime because of the complex nature of the relations between Turkey and Iran.

The birth of democracy is painful and it is never perfect. However there is no reason - cultural, religious or ethnic - that Middle Eastern societies will not suceed in this effort. Religious fundamentalism, dictatorship and terror are not unique to the region. They were realities in the developed world.

There is a general consensus that one of the major problems in the region is the habit of blaming others for their state of affairs. We believe the strengthening of civil society will play a critical role in this process by empowering people, offering checks and balances and home grown solutions to the challenges which are being faced. In Turkey's case, we observe that given the means to make a difference, feelings of hopelessness quickly fade away.

This issue of TPQ aims to give a voice to practitioners and leaders of opposition groups in the region as well as experienced policymakers and politicians from Europe, the US and Turkey. We hope to combine perspectives from people of diverse backgrounds, regarding their hopes and fears, as well as suggestions and visions for the future of the broader Middle East region.

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