

The Network for Reform and Change in the Arab World

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From 8 December to 10 December, 2005, more than 60 high level politicians, journalists and representatives of civil society organizations from every corner of the Arab world met in the Kempinski Hotel Amman to inaugurate the Arab Network for Reform and Change. The event was organized as a joint effort of the Al-Quds Centre for Political Studies and the Regional Office Amman of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and was held under the patronage of his Excellency, the Prime Minister of Jordan.

The conference was opened by Oraib Al-Rantawi, the director of the Al-Quds Center for Political Studies in Amman. He defined in his address the two main goals for the conference. First, the participants should build a cooperative initiative for reform. Secondly, the network of reform should facilitate a space to exchange ideas on cooperation, even between countries with different prerogatives. Furthermore, Mr. Al-Rantawi pointed out that sustainability should be the first guideline during the discussion on reform and change.

In his welcome-address, the regional representative of the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation in Amman, Dr. Hardy Ostry, underlined the necessity of preparing a network for political reform and change in the region in order to face the reform discussion in the Arab world in a new perspective. Though, as Dr. Ostry pointed out "the region does not lack initiatives that take up the reform debate", there are nevertheless only networks and initiatives whose mem-

berships have a very specific and exclusive composition, and thus isolating themselves from the rest of society. Therefore, the organizers of the conference would like to find a different, more comprehensive approach, including representatives from all fields of society.

Dr. Ostry concluded his remarks by commenting on the nature and goals of political reforms. These do not serve as an end in itself but rather aim at transforming a negative situation into a positive one. The important question for the conference was, which criteria were to guide the participants in their quest for reforms? Dr. Ostry considered the solution to be connected to universal values that are beyond traditionalism or indifference and can be communicated.

Thus the issue of values and the ultimate goal of reform was the leitmotif during the conference and the discussion between the participants. The first keynote speech of the conference was held by HE, Dr. Ralf Brauksiepe, Member of the German Parliament and the speaker of the CDU/CSU-Parliamentary Group for Development Cooperation. Focusing on the Barcelona Process, Dr. Brauksiepe stressed his commitment to intensify the cooperation between the Arab states and the EU over the coming years, since neither the EU nor the Mediterranean states will be able to solve the difficult questions of the coming years without the other's help.

The speaker underlined Europe's interest in reform in the countries of the Middle East

and the European's goal to support these reforms in any way possible. Yet, as Dr. Brauksiepe pointed out, the Europeans can only accompany the reform efforts of the Arab partners and cannot, and must not, impose the change on the Arab countries, since the countries of the region are considered as equal partners by the Europeans.

Dr. Brauksiepe continued his speech with a short presentation of the Barcelona Process and its three main policy fields: 1) the political and security partnership, 2) the economic and financial partnership and 3) the partnership in social and cultural affairs. He pointed to the successes of the Euro-Med Partnership, especially in the fields of economics, yet he did not spare with constructive criticism addressed at the EU as well as the Mediterranean states, for example in the fight against terrorism, reform, and human rights.

Dr. Brauksiepe's remarks were followed by the second keynote speaker of the conference, HE Dr. Sabri Rbeihat, Minister of Political Development and Parliamentary Affairs of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and Representative of HE, the Prime Minister of Jordan.

In his speech, Dr. Rbeihat stressed the importance of the conference on reform and change and its original approach since "new patterns will raise the performance of groups and individuals." He underlined the fact that the conference comes at a decisive time in Jordan, since the Kingdom does real efforts to achieve political development. According to Dr. Rbeihat, the process of reform is hindered by the Islamists currents in Jordan, which do not have the correct views on globalization and sometimes do not accept reality. The minister stressed the need for reform to come from inside and pointed at the hindrance of regional conflicts to the reform process. Nevertheless, according to Dr. Rbeihat, these conflicts can not serve as an excuse to postpone necessary reforms which will lead to updated political structures, security and public participation. His Excellency concluded by stressing the support of the Jordanian government for any reform in the Arab world.

First Session: Political Reforms: Concept and Chances for a Joint Vision

The first session, chaired by Mr. Abdulrahman Al-Noaimi, began with the presentation of Dr. Ibrahim Badran, Deputy President of Philadelphia University, Amman, titled "Controversy of the Arab Particularity between Illusion and Entitlement".

In his lecture, Dr. Badran tackled the greatest problems of Arab society, which were named as: the continuity of backwardness, little transformation from an agricultural to a modern society, little spending on research, no democratic regimes, a confusion in thought and culture regarding progress, the religious belief that the events of the future have already been decided, a lack of a vision for progress and, most importantly, the emphasize on Arab particularity.

Particularity entails the opinion that models of thought and governance, which can be applied on other societies, cannot be applied to Arab societies, due to differences in history and culture. According to Dr. Badran, this emphasize on particularities is used as an argument to avoid change. Most particularities have been actually imposed on society by their own governments and elites and can be changed due to the fact that societies are dynamic and thus allow and demand such change.

Dr. Badran continued by claiming that this emphasize on Arab particularity constitutes one of the main reasons for the backwardness of the Arab world, since the latter cannot benefit from experiences of other cultures and nations. Thus, by pointing at the Arab particularity, the Arab society is being isolated from other societies. Dr. Badran agreed to the fact that Arab particularity exists. Nevertheless, "differences between nations do not change the rules of nature; they do not change the needs of technology".

The second speaker of the session was Mr. Thomas Schiller, spokesman for European Affairs of the CDU/CSU Parliamentary Group in the German parliament. Mr. Schiller discussed the "European Approaches to Arab

Reform", focusing on the Barcelona Process and its implication for the Arab reform movements. He pointed to the fact that the EU can only help in the reform process when Arab countries define their reform vision and identify several concrete issues.

Furthermore, he stressed the need for the close neighbours EU and Mediterranean countries to tackle the challenges of reform together on the level of partnership between the two.

The following, lively discussion focused mainly on the issue of particularities. While many of the participants agreed on the thesis of Dr. Badran that particularities do constitute a hindrance to the reform process, others presented different opinions, such as the viewpoint that the real obstacle to reform are the Arab regimes and not Arab particularities and that the West's support for dictatorial regimes and the occupation of Iraq and Palestine constitute the greatest hindrance of reform. On the other hand some participants argued that particularities should be seen as something positive and taken as an incentive for reform.

Concerning the presentation of Mr. Thomas Schiller, most participants agreed with the speaker, yet criticized that the Barcelona Process is not deep and comprehensive enough and expressed their wish for a greater engagement of the EU in the region and more cooperation with the Arab countries.

Second Session: Arab Reform Initiatives: Accomplishments and Failures

The second session, chaired by Dr. Suffian Alissa, started with the lecture of Mr. Christopher J. Scott, Democracy Team Leader of USAID-Jordan. He presented the work of USAID in Jordan which is based on four pillars: Support of Good Governance, economic development, education and woman's empowerment. Mr. Scott stressed the fact that the Bush administration does not want to impose their style of democracy on the countries in the Middle East but is nevertheless committed to support reform and the above mentioned fields.

His presentation was followed by Dr. Mohammad Al-Momani, Professor for Political Science at Yarmouk University in Irbid, Jordan, who compared European to US-American reform initiatives. Starting with the Barcelona Process, Dr. Al-Momani explained that this process consists of a series of bilateral agreements of the EU with Arab states, but was motivated by security considerations on the European side. Therefore, only 1% of the budget went to political issues such as democracy and good governance, while the economical field received the greatest amount of funding.

The speaker claimed that the security fears of the Europeans are mainly motivated by the fact that in the near future the income gap between the EU and the Arab states will further grow, alongside with the population in the latter, which will lead to more immigrants to the EU and greater extremism in the Arab states. The US, on the other hand, came after 9/11 to the conclusion that without political stability there cannot be development which in turn is crucial for security. Thus there is a relation between security/stability and reform/democracy.

The speaker was aware of the disagreement the US-policy in the Middle East is causing and thus addressed the issue of Arab criticism levelled against the US, claiming that the US (and also the EU) is not dictating how reform should be implemented in the Arab world, but are only pressing for reform in general. Dr. Al-Momani defended this approach by pointing to the successful elections which have taken place in some Arab countries due to outside pressure.

Concluding, the speaker called on the US and the EU to make conditionality (the progress of reforms) a part of their support for the region.

The last speaker of this session was Mr. Abdulrahman Al-Noaimi, the chairman of the National Centre for Studies in Manama, Bahrain. He focused in his presentation on the accomplishments and failures of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in Bahrain. He listed several problems of the Gulf regimes: They are traditional, tribal and royal

with rulers highly dependent on the West, yet the country is deeply influenced by religion which controls the daily life and politics. All the Gulf countries have no constitutions, political parties as well as unions (exception is Bahrain) are banned and no civil society organization can work without consulting the ruler before. The speaker concluded by calling for an end of the tribal system in the Gulf, for political parties, civil society organizations, constitutional monarchy, separation of authority, and freedom of press.

The following discussion focused mainly on the presentation by Christopher J. Scott and the role of the United States in the region and in the reform process. Some criticism was launched at the representative of USAID, claiming that the US involvement in the area and the US demand for reform is a form of new western imperialism and motivated by self-interest. On the other hand, participants showed appreciation for the work of USAID in the region but demanded more pressure on the Arab regimes and asked the US and EU to implement the concept of conditionality when offering support to the Arab regimes.

Furthermore, it was suggested that the EU and the US should increase their cooperation concerning aid projects in the region in order to ensure an increase in affectivity.

Third Session: Reforms and Internal and External Controversies

The third session, chaired by Dr. Hasan Makkei began with the presentation of Dr. Fouad Ali Al-Ibrahim from Saudi-Arabia with the topic "Reform between Implicit and Deferred Will".

After analyzing the development of the reform movement in Saudi-Arabia in the last years, the speaker stated that there is no reform tradition in the Arab world, due to the fact that reforms were always made between the elites. Today, everyone in the Arab world agrees that reforms are necessary, yet the discussion at the moment is revolving around the question when to implement reform and to what amount.

Concerning the role of outside powers, such as the US and the EU, Dr. Al-Ibrahim pointed to several reforms in Saudi-Arabia in the last years, such as a limited freedom of press, municipal election and a discussion about woman rights, which would have not been possible without outside pressure, though there have always been local demands. Thus, the speaker argued for reform from the inside which is supported by outside pressure on the Arab regimes.

The second speaker of this session was Mrs. Huda Shalak from Lebanon, who presented the reform movement in Lebanon. After pointing to the exceptional case, which Lebanon represents in the Arab World, the speaker commented on the recent events, especially the killing of Rafik Hariri which united the people in Lebanon, creating a solidarity which is crossing the lines of different sects and religions. Tackling the question of foreign intervention in internal affairs, Mrs Huda Shalak stated that from the Lebanese experience, which included many invasions and interventions by foreigners, we can learn that it does not help to blame others. The Arab people need to change their destiny by reforms and democratic education.

The last speaker of this session was Mr. George Ishak from the Egyptian Kiffayya Movement. His presentation focused on the political experiences of Kiffayya, pointing at strategies for pressuring the dictatorial regimes for reforms. First of all, Mr. Ishak explained that the Kiffayya movement is a political movement of conscience whose founders come from all places in society. By telling the audience how his movement had wrestled the right to demonstrate from the Egyptian authorities, Mr. Ishak underlined his thesis that democracy is something that has to be strongly demanded by people all over the Arab world, fighting peacefully for their rights.

Furthermore, the speaker explained Kiffayya's vision for reform and a democratic state, based on pluralism, the concept of citizenship for everyone, and the rule of law and freedom.

Mr. Ishak stressed that this demands can be achieved by demonstrations and pointed at the considerable achievements of the movement in Egypt, such as the fact that people openly criticise Mubarak now. He criticized that in Egypt there had previously not been any demonstrations concerning internal Egyptian affairs; the only demonstrations which took place were tackling Arab issues such as Palestine or Iraq.

He concluded by asking the participants to offer a comprehensive program for reform in order to overcome the division between the reformists in the Arab world. The following discussion focused on the methods for reform and increased support of the reformers for each other.

One participant claimed that the most important task for the reformers in the Arab world is to strengthen the grassroots, since the problem is that not only the ruler is suppressing his people actively, but also the public is accepting it passively.

Furthermore, it was suggested that reformers in the Arab world should show more solidarity for each other, for example when an activist is arrested in Egypt, like-minded people all over the Arab world should protest publicly in order to increase the pressure on the regime.

Apart from that, most participants highly praised the achievements of the Kiffayya movement in Egypt which they said "broke the taboos in Egyptian society".

Fourth Session: Political Islam and Reform

The fourth session, chaired by Dr. Hasan Nafaa, was opened with the presentation of Dr. Sa'ed Addeen Al-Othmani, the Secretary General of the Justice and Development Party in Morocco.

Dr. Nafa'a's presented in his speech his view on the role of Islam in a democratic political system. He pointed out that law like the shari'a cannot be imposed on society, all parties have to follow the rules of democracy and there needs to be a distinction be-

tween worldly and religious institutions of the state. As the main tasks for the future of reform in Morocco, Dr. Nafa'a named the struggle for more independence of the judicial system, more transparency in the electoral system and to improve the country's economical situation.

The second speaker, Dr. Ghanem Jawad of the Al-Khawe'i Foundation in London, introduced the participants to the different Shi'a movements in Iraq. He concluded that the Islamic Shi'a movement in Iraq tried to formulate a new theory of reform and democracy in an Islamic framework.

The third speaker was Prof. Abdelaziz Al-Khamis, Sociology Professor of Riyadh University. In his lecture titled "Islamists and Democracy", Prof. Al-Khamis traced the different Sunni currents in Saudi Arabia, their political ideology and attitude towards reform and democracy. He recommended that this network should promote the idea of giving Islamists a chance to participate in the democratic process. Moderate Islamists are needed and should be encouraged to participate and to give their ideas on the democratic process. He pointed out that the Islamists, even the moderate ones, are confronted with a lot of opposition from the rulers, since the latter are afraid of the Islamists strategy of combining modern ideas with the street. They believe in free expression and thus Islamists should be supported.

The fourth and last speaker of this session, Dr. Mohammad Habash, Member of the Syrian People Parliament, focused in his presentation on the compatibility of democracy and Islam. He claimed that in the Quran there are many contradictions which can be solved by rereading the text and understanding certain passages as analogies. Apart from that, the rule applies that a later Sura cancels a previous one, since the prophet himself changed the qibla (direction of prayer) from Jerusalem to Mecca.

Dr. Habash considered the Quran a holy scripture which has to be re-interpreted in order to fit to the current needs of society, quoting many passages from the scripture

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itself when the Prophet or his followers did as such.

The following discussion focused on the compatibility of Islam and democracy with several participants questioning Dr. Al-Othmani in his function as the Secretary General of the Justice and Development Party about the rights of minorities and woman in a political system which would follow the Shari'a. Other participants called for an end of the so-called "language of blasphemy" with which many liberal reformers are attacked by Islamists.

Nevertheless, the majority of participants expressed the wish to further integrate moderate Islamists in the reform and democracy process and stated their conviction that Islam and democracy do not contradict each other.

Fifth Session: Reform and Regional Conflicts in the Arab World

The first speaker of this session, chaired by Dr. Abdelaal Al-Razaqi, was H.E. Dr. Mohammad Halaiqa, Senator and Former Minister of National Economy and Minister of State of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

In his presentation, he focused on the recent events in Amman (the terrorist attacks of November 9) and the relations between the Islamists and the state. He pointed out that the Islamists in Jordan are not as strong as in other Arab countries and underlined the governments' continuous effort for reconciliation with the Islamists, which is easier than for other regimes since the Jordanian Islamists have never been in a conflict situation vis-à-vis the government.

The second speaker, H.E. Dr. Bakhtiar Amin, the former Human Rights Minister of Iraq, presented his view on the current situation of human rights and reform in the Arab world. He vividly recalled the horrors of the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein and criticized the other Arab nations for their passivity during these years and, based on this experience, called for a greater US and EU involvement in the Mid-

dle East, while at the same time condemning the long-standing support of the West for dictatorships in the region by quoting US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice "For 60 years we supported dictators for stability and neglected democracy and in the end we achieved neither."

Furthermore, Dr. Amin called for a stronger interaction of US or EU initiatives for reform with local civil society organizations and emphasized that reform always has to include democracy, since without the latter, no reform could be sustainable.

Concerning the Network for Reform and Change, Dr. Amin demanded a greater participation of religious and ethnical minorities in the Middle East. In the following discussion many participants criticized Dr. Amin's call for greater US involvement in the region and his praise for the US military intervention in Iraq. Thus the discussion focused mainly on the topic of US intervention in the region. Another subject discussed was the greater involvement of minorities, as Dr. Amin had called for in his speech; an idea that was generally met with positive reactions.

Sixth Session: Role of Civil Society in the Reform and Democratization Process

The first presentation of this session, which was chaired by Mr. Thomas Birringer, was held by Dr. Badria Al-Awadi, Executive Director of the Arab Regional Centre for Environmental Law in Kuwait. She focused on the role of woman in the reform process, claiming that no reform in the Arab world can succeed without empowering the woman. Furthermore, she strongly criticized some Arab countries for not implementing international agreements on woman's rights which were signed by the respective government.

Dr. Al-Awadi claimed that most of the inequality of the Arab woman today is caused by the influence of the Islamists and traditional thinking. Citing an example of success for woman's organizations, Dr. Al-Awadi explained how previous strategic planning led to the implementation of woman rights in

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Kuwait (granted the right to vote). In this context, Dr. Al- Awadi underlined the need for a clear vision of civil society organisations in order to perform an organized and successful struggle against discrimination.

The second speaker was Mrs. Nafisa Lahrache, President of the Association Femmes en Communication, Alger.

She presented the situation of women in Algeria today after years of terror in the 1990's. Overall, Mrs Lahrache draw a very positive picture of the women organisations in Algeria: In Algeria now woman can transfer her nationality and possessions to their children. Other laws, for example against sexual harassment, are providing greater protection for women. Today, 25% of the members of the Algerian parliament are woman, not by quota, but by struggle.

Generally speaking, Mrs Lahrache praised the developments of the last years in Algeria, which saw a move in the direction of democracy after the horrors of the 1990's. Today, the parliament harbours Islamists, democrats and nationalists, working together in an atmosphere of cooperation. Mrs Lahrache contributed these successes to the efforts and struggles of the civil society.

Kamel Ben Younes, Professor at Tunis University and Journalist for BBC and Assabah Daily, concluded the session with his remarks on the role of NGO's in the reform process. Arguing that after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the gruesome events in Algeria in the 90's, there are mainly two players today in the political system of the Arab world.

These are the Islamists and the autocratic regimes. Thus the NGO's and the other institutions of the civil society are the only independent currents and have to become the third important player.

To achieve this goal, it is important to cooperate with Europe and the US. Prof. Younes argued that liberty should come before democracy and any democracy has to be preceded by a stage of freedom. This freedom would produce new elites and then elections

could be hold which would result in stable democracies.

In the following discussion, the main points raised were related to the obstacles faced by woman in many countries in the Arab world and strategies to advance the women's standing, for example by a greater networking between the different organizations in order to profit from each others experience.

Another subjected raised was the relationship between the reformers and NGO's and the general public. Some participants claimed that there are many people calling for reform in the Arab world but there is a gap between the reformer and the people. The reformers are culturally isolated. Thus the reformers should closely monitor cultural trends in the Arab world and use these in order to convey their message of reform in a way that the simple people feel touched by it.