

Challenges to Reform in North Africa

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Introduction

Importance of the AEI's event especially that it is held by an American civil society institution that defends its own beliefs regardless of governmental interests.

The case of Tunisia

Although not visible to common visitors, Tunisia is an autocracy, where no free independent civil society can be peacefully built.

Questions on debate

- *Could free elections pacify Moslem societies?
Under long-lasting autocracies free elections do not offer a "democratic" solution since the electoral tool becomes a demagogical tool.*

- *Should we first pacify the Moslem societies to allow free election?
Pacifying first the civil society to allow free elections seems to me the right way to obtain real democratic elections. But! Under the imperative condition that we first get an open political context to build a free independent civil society.*

The imperative need of external support

International pressures on autocracies and open support to dissidents are imperative needs. If the US wants to fight terrorism, then the US should go to its roots and fight its real causes.

Possible solution

*Use the internet to build together a cohesive, credible multinational civil society.
Use this international network to create a multi-national Think Tank able to produce specialized contents for mass distribution through Internet and TV stations.*

If autocracies feel through a strong American support to dissidents that they are at risk that others might do what they should be doing, they might probably become more open to efficient political reforms in order to avoid being totally excluded and isolated. If they don't, we will continue our own way.

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Introduction

Freely speaking my mind among you *is a very important event for me*. In my country there is no room for it. Both, freedom of speech and freedom of association or even meetings, are submitted to very restrictive laws and arbitrary punishments. So I would like to warmly thank Daniel Pletka and Michael Rubin for offering me this opportunity hoping that through the American Enterprise Institute, I will have a chance to be heard in my own country which is totally deaf to all citizens' political claims. This event is particularly important because it is held by an American civil society institution that defends its own beliefs regardless of governmental interests.

Regarding Tunisia

Although not visible to common visitors, I want to confirm that Tunisia is an autocracy, *where no free independent civil society can be peacefully built*. All the official civil society is totally loyal to the regime. The moment you show any interest to political affairs you are confronted to this reality and you discover the hidden frightening side of the very nice touristic postcard that is very well promoted by the regime. My concern is that part of the International community and Tunisians themselves still refuse to see that the regime is leading us towards a dead-end. They would rather believe the regime's propaganda than engage in any political action that might expose them to all sorts of conflicts of interests or arbitrary punishments for locals.

The questions on debate

While many still fear that less authority in the Moslem world might give advantage to theocracies, we cannot maintain a status quo producing terrorism and we need to determine which strategy is the best to progress towards democracy.

Since the end of the war on Iraq and its consequences, two questions are often on debate. Can free elections allow a pacific development of Moslem societies? Or should we first pacify Moslem societies to allow free elections?

- ***Could free elections pacify Moslem societies?***

I don't believe that free elections are the solution. Free elections can only be efficient in democracies when they are the result of a democratic political maturity through the growth of a free independent civil society. Autocracies are conscious that free independent civil societies are mainly dangerous for their own maintenance in power and therefore they always blocked its free emergence.

On another hand in a country like Tunisia, for example, the notion of a "Republican State" was not the result of our own political maturity, or our own imagination. It was a notion that has been imported through colonization while neither the regime nor the people really understood its deep spirit. We only adapted western republican institutions to our local Moslem context.

Even though former President Bourguiba tried to introduce secularism in mentalities, secularism had never been clearly and fairly explained and is still mixed with of atheism that is totally rejected by most Moslems. Economically, the socialist model was chosen, giving the image of a providential paternalist State which is the closest to the well known Islamic model that maintains citizens in an immature political state of mind.

Later President Ben Ali moved to a more liberal economic policy as suggested by the IMF. However, in lack of democratic legitimacy; politically, he got closer to an Islamist state of mind. He blocked access to most of the political, individual and collective freedoms that should have accompanied economical liberalism.

Under such conditions of a challenging transition from a socialist to a liberal economic policy, and a lack of political maturity of a people that is neither well informed nor well prepared; those who use populist or demagogic speeches, like communists, socialists or Islamists will naturally have all chances to win free elections. We already witnessed it, in Algeria and in Iran and we are clearly witnessing it currently in Iraq and in Egypt. Such a success is far from being a democratic success. It is a success within failure to progress.

As a liberal, I consider that these demagogic voices only represent traditional passive and easy forces to manipulate. In my understanding the ultimate goal of republican institutions is to allow the emergence of the best competencies possible able to lead people to a better future rather than to block them in a continuous situation of economical and human underdevelopment. *Therefore under long-lasting autocracies free elections do not offer a "democratic" solution since the electoral tool becomes a demagogical tool.*

- ***Should we first pacify Moslem societies to allow free election?***

Now, pacifying first the Moslem societies to allow free elections seems to me the right way to obtain real democratic elections. But! Under the imperative condition that we first get an open political context to build a free independent civil society.

The Tunisian example shows every day the obstacles of building a free independent civil society since freedom of speech and freedom of association are not yet obtained. In order to remain in power, autocracies use a multitude of resources and tools to create and maintain tensions and divisions within the different components of a society.

On another hand, autocracies usually produce dissents and dissidents rather than reforms and reformers. On the contrary of reformers who are able of cooperation and pragmatism, dissidents are usually very difficult to unify or to reconcile within autocracies. Personal interests, personal sufferings and leadership issues become the main source of disparity and inconsistency of their activism.

Of course, Islamists who always control the largest popular support in such countries, rarely accept alliances or compromises with other political ideologies which might make them loose their own credibility within there own supporters. Cohesion or unity, seem utopist issues, and most people end up secretly dreaming of a coup which remains the solution with the most unpredictable outcome.

The imperative need of external support

I hope I convinced you that we first need a freer political context that is not yet available in most Moslem countries. *International pressures on such regimes and open support to dissidents become imperative needs.*

If the US wants to fight terrorism, then the US should go to its roots and fight its real causes. Theocrats, Islamic terrorism and anti Americanism, are no fate. They are the direct result of autocracies supported for a long time by the West in the name of an artificial stability while every one knows that violence and repression cannot be the cement of cohesion or a lasting stability in any nation. If political Islam emerged from our past in our supposedly modern Moslem states, it is because all political landscapes were

blocked, human rights were not respected, state of law is not yet established and there are still no peaceful ways within Moslem countries to build free and independent civil societies. When there is no room for political and civil freedoms, mosques become the natural place for political issues and poverty the natural cement for mass mobilization. The reason behind radicalism is regimes' violence and repression.

While external pressures are still considered as interfering in local national affairs restrictive laws regarding fundamental freedoms are simply "unacceptable". If each country has its specific context and needs its own standards of evolution freedom of speech and freedom of association are and will always be the minimum credible standards for any new born democracy. Without these freedoms guaranteed no free civil society can be built, and no regime can pretend being evolving towards an authentic democracy.

On another hand dissidents face loss of credibility when they try to get any support from the West. They are accused both by regimes and by Islamists of antipatriotism or collaboration with "imperialist enemy forces".

These two visions must be readjusted since cooperating in promoting freedoms is the only realistic path to security as Mrs. Rice argues. If Moslem governments do cooperate with the West, Moslem civil societies should be able to do the same to strengthen coherent pacific relations. Regardless of governments' interests, international civil societies must help each other to develop and finance new bridges of cooperation and support. Building independent civil societies within the Moslem world to help promote freedoms and political maturity must be our common goal.

Possible solutions

Now turning to the possible solutions; current communication tools offer an interesting variety of possibilities. I think Internet is on top of list of these tools since it is the "most democratic" communication tool. At this point, I want you all to know that I first met Michael Rubin only through Internet. This shows how powerful this tool can be for communication, dialogue and network building. Diversity of in formations, diversity of subjects to debate without fear, freedom of choice, instant interactivity, diversity of contacts, free will and transparency are its major qualities.

Therefore as a first step, Internet, at a comparatively low cost and with only a minimum investment, can allow us to connect international civil societies. Through Internet we can identify then build a professional international network that would be composed of journalists, animators, moderators, existing associations and of course world independent citizens willing to participate in freeing blocked political landscapes to bring them all to the same level of political opening.

Recomposed groups can specialize on particular issues or countries, since all countries don't face the same situations. They will first work on building confidence within the network members while strengthening their credibility on the ground through the different publications, researches and opened debates, proposed to any one willing to participate in order to create an inclusive constructive dynamism.

As a second step, these groups can organize themselves to create a specialized international Think Tank. This Think Tank should be established specifically in the northern part of the Mediterranean region within international laws which will allow getting around local restrictive laws and yet remain effective. This strategic position will also help found a better dialogue between civil societies from the Arab world, Europe and the United States. Such a diversified Think Tank can identify a variety of strategies based on different successful experiences from around the world.

While as a start, Internet is an attractive tool thanks to its technical possibilities of very low cost for advertising and promoting, we are conscious that it does not yet have the impact of a credible Television station that can reach millions of people in the secure intimacy of their homes. However the combination of both tools, Internet and Television, can have a very positive immediate impact.

Therefore as a third step, if we found our way on this ground, with more international financing we will be able to produce TV contents focusing on the positive impact of a free independent civil society in order to educate a people that is not familiar with the political role of civil societies. Within the Think tank, American, European and Arab experts in Middle Eastern issues will have more voice and debates will be richer. This will challenge Al Jazeera and similar stations to raise their level of debates and reduce their very oriented editorial lines.

I suppose it was the ambition of "Al Hurra". But I think, that it lost, most of its possible credibility because of the timing of its opening right after the very controversial war on Iraq, also because it is still considered as an exclusive American propaganda tool, finally because the name "Al Hurra" became linked to a negative notion of occupation. However the initiative itself was an excellent one that can and should be readapted more positively within the evolution of the after war realities.

Now, I know that this was a dense presentation covering a vast array of subjects in a short amount of time, so if you are to take with you just one thing from this presentation it is the following:

1. Pacifying Moslem societies is a prerequisite to any free elections in the Moslem world
2. In order to pacify these societies within an autocracies I believe that the following tools are imperative:
 - a. We need strong international support to dissidents
 - b. We need the internet to build together a cohesive, credible multinational civil society
 - c. We need this international network to create a multi-national Think Tank able to produce specialized content focusing on civil society issues, for mass distribution through Internet an TV stations

In conclusion, if autocracies feel through a strong American support to dissidents that they are at risk that others might do what they should be doing, they might probably become more open to efficient political reforms in order to avoid being totally excluded and isolated. If they don't, we should continue our own way to build together a freer future to the upcoming generations.

I came from Tunisia determined that together we will create the necessary dynamism that will bring concretely the Tunisian democratic process as part of the American priorities in all domains of cooperation. I sincerely hope you got my message.

Thank you for your presence, your attention and your time.