

Islam and Democracy

Reflecting on a Glorious Past to Build a Brilliant Future

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1. INTRODUCTION

Thank you for inviting me to deliver this important address. There has never been a time when the polarization of feelings has been as acute, and the stakes for the promotion of common understanding and mutual respect as great as right now. The advocates of the ostensible "clash of civilizations" who want to make it a self-fulfilling prophecy, find ample comfort in the statements and actions of the extremist few. The media amplify the statements and views of those who do not want to know better, and the voices of reason are drowned out in the cacophony of images and messages that preach hatred and destruction.

Against this background, we have to ask three questions:

First, What is the nature of this perceived clash between "Islam and the West"? In this we must remain cognizant that the terms "Islam and the West" are themselves burdened with a luggage of associative meaning from constant misuse and abuse.

Second, What is the status of the thinking within this rich mosaic that we call the Muslim World? For there are as many, if not more, clashes that pit Muslim against Muslim, as there are that confront Muslim and non-Muslim.

Third, What are the prospects that Muslims in the countries where they predominate, as well as in those countries where they are a minority, will adopt democratic ways of governance?

Allow me to say a brief word or two about each of these three topics.

2. ON THE CONFRONTATION BETWEEN ISLAM AND THE WEST

As I mentioned, the terms "West" and "Islam" are terms lacking precision, and are usually misused and abused in the popular press. For most Muslims, including myself, something is termed Islamic if it relates to the faith, and Muslim if it relates to the activities of people who profess to be Muslims. Here we are undeniably talking of the activities of people, and hence Muslim would be more appropriate. Thus, it is perhaps better to talk of the Western and Muslim Worlds, the worlds of peoples who identify themselves as "Western" or "Muslim" in terms of their cultural identities. Even then this is somewhat dangerous since it does not recognize the enormous diversity that exists in each of these two worlds, and tends to promote the kind of unitary identities referred to by Amin Maalouf as "murderous identities".

Political, not Ideological Confrontations

As was noted in the important report issued by the High-level Group (HLG) of the Alliance of Civilizations in November 2006, the main confrontations between the Muslim and Western worlds are political, not religious or ideological. If you look at the quintessential conflict, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Palestinians include both Christians and Muslims. Furthermore, at the heart of the matter are issues of refugees, self-determination, occupation, human rights, land, and security. All are political issues. It

obscures the issues to cast the conflict in terms of ideological world views or in terms of religious confrontations.

In fact, the HLG went further, underlining that the only beneficiaries of casting the issues in this manner are Al-Qaeda and similar groups that want to promote a "clash of civilizations", claiming the inevitability of conflict and the need for total war.

Muslims and Arabs

In much of what I will say in this presentation I will be speaking of both the Arab and Muslim worlds. They overlap but are not the same. What connects the Arabs is language. There are many Muslims who are not Arab, and many Arabs who are not Muslim. Yet the Arab world plays a privileged role within the Muslim world for harboring the birthplace of Islam and its most holy shrines. Islam, as a religion, and as a cultural force, has played a central role in shaping the history of the Arab people.

A different world, but equally important is the world of Muslim minorities in the western countries. In many countries today, Islam is becoming the second religion in terms of number of adherents. These minorities can one day play an important role in changing the overall climate of thought in the whole Arab and Muslim worlds as we know them, especially if Turkey ultimately joins the EU and continues to thrive. They will be part of the western reality and polity and will have to adapt and rethink many of the positions and reject many of the dogmas that are being advocated in Arab and Muslim worlds. Likewise, the minorities in Asia and Latin America will have unique experiences that will be worthy of careful monitoring and study. However, all that is for another discussion. I will today focus on the vast expanse of the countries where Muslims predominate from the Atlantic to Indonesia, and from Central Asia to Northern Nigeria.

Whichever way we define it, these societies are in crisis today. Their predicament is the topic of the second section of my remarks. But before I address that, allow me to focus on a few of the more important issues in terms of western media misrepresentation of Muslim realities.

Overcoming Some Misunderstandings

The history of early Islam in the seventh century AD is totally contrary to the many popular notions about it, especially the notions frequently represented in the Western Media.

Islam and Peace:

Islam was NOT spread by the sword. It was largely spread by the power of example in a peaceful way. Indeed, in 13 years of the prophet's efforts to spread the message of Islam in Mecca, confronting persecution and maltreatment, he had only a few hundred converts. He fled to Medina in 622 CE, and the phase of open struggle started. In Badr, the first battle with the Qurashites, he could marshal only 300 men. Despite being the master of a secure base in Madinah, six years of war led to his coming to Hudaibiyah with some 2000 men. He made a peace that appeared to be very onerous on the Muslims. A peace that would be broken by the Qurashites, not by the Muslims two years later. But in those two years of peace, Islam spread like wildfire. When the Qurashites broke the peace, the Prophet marched on Mecca with 10,000 men, took the city without bloodshed, and declared a general amnesty for all his enemies. The following year saw delegations from all the tribes of Arabia come to declare their conversion to Islam (*'Am al wufud*) and by the time of the prophet's death the following year, all of Arabia had converted to Islam.

His close companions invented the system of Caliphate, and appointed Abu Bakr, the first convert to Islam, as the Caliph (*Khalifa*), or the successor to the Prophet as a ruler of the Muslims. But shaken by Muhammad's death, some of the newly converted tribes rebelled against the Caliph, and decided to redefine Islam as they pleased or simply revoke it. It led to a bloody 18-month war known as the wars of apostasy or sedition (*hurub al riddah*). The Muslims won, but at a heavy price. And Muslim armies were to conquer a vast empire within a decade! In those conquests many see the expansion of Islam by the sword. That is not so. Non-Muslims in the conquered lands were offered very generous terms, and were not forced to convert, nor were they pressed into service to fight in the Muslim armies. They had to pay an extra tax, called the *Jizya*. Indeed, when Egyptians wanted to convert to Islam in droves, *Amr Ibn Al'As*, governor of Egypt, sought to prevent them, lest that lucrative tax revenue diminish. The Caliph Umar sent him a terse message reminding him that "God had sent Muhammad as a messenger, not as a tax collector"!

One could marshal many more stories, including how Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world today, was largely converted through contacts with traders and scholars, but I invite you all to read the details of our history and make up your own minds on this point. Indeed, early Muslims did follow the injunction that there is no compulsion in religion, as is stated in the Quran:

There is no compulsion in religion [Surah al-Baqara, verse 256]

Sharia and Jurisprudence:

Sharia is the application of the divinely revealed principles and rules given in Islam as elaborated by the practice of the prophet into a codified system of laws for governing the transactions of people in Muslim societies. As such, it is a related body of knowledge of jurisprudence that has been built up through centuries of interpretation and practice. It is therefore a source of inspiration for legislation, much as one would argue that common law, natural law or the French civil code could be such an inspiration in the drafting and interpretation of legislation. But it is important to underline that it is an accumulation of opinions and rulings that represent the best judgments and interpretations of men. It is thus subject to interpretation in our contemporary times as much as in their times.

By and large, that legacy is remarkably progressive. Indeed, Muslims should be very proud of the legislation that was produced at the time of the early Muslim empire by the second Caliph in Islam Umar Ibn El Kahtab. His legal philosophy was incredibly progressive for someone who ruled in the seventh century (634-644). Many of his rulings are remarkably modern even to this day. For example, *the presumption of innocence*. Umar's instructions to the judges he appointed started with the sentence: the burden of proof is on the accuser, from the accused, only the declaration of innocence under oath is required. This is unbelievable in the seventh century, if we look back at the history of jurisprudence throughout the Middle Ages, people would use torture to extract confessions from the accused.

Evidence gathered illegally is not acceptable as evidence. Umar ruled that an accusation made by a person breaching the rights of privacy, was void; you cannot break the law in the name of maintaining the law. This is of course to this day a major issue in law enforcement in advanced countries such as the United States where questions about the rights of due process and the guarantees of individual rights in the gathering evidence were already foreshadowed by Umar Ibn El Khatab 1300 years ago.

Justice delayed is justice denied: Umar ruled that time must be fixed, for justice that is not swift is unfair. The rich can afford to wait, the poor cannot.

Confronting the accuser. Umar ruled that the accused should be able to confront his accuser, before witnesses and a judge. This principle was essential to ensure fairness in the opinions of the judge after hearing the opinions of all concerned.

Umar extended the social security system of his time (public treasury, alms and taxes, revenues of which were distributed to the poor and destitute) to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. He was named the Just, *Al Farouq*, by his non-Muslim subjects.

Umar was severe, he challenged his governors with *conflict of interest* laws. He could also be remarkably merciful, he recognized underlying *attenuating circumstances*. In the year in which there was a famine throughout Arabia (*Am al-Ramada*), he decreed that no severe punishments should be enacted because no one knew if people who stole, stole because of need or greed and he could not review every single case.

Reflecting on that body of jurisprudence coming out of a small village *Al Madina* in Arabia, in the seventh century of our era is indeed eye-opening. Far from thinking of it as retrograde, there is much in *Sharia* that lends itself to contemporary and modern interpretations, if we are to have but a small fraction of the courage of those early Muslims.

Jihad:

Jihad does not mean holy war. If it were, the word for it would have been *Al Harb Al Mukadasa*. *Jihad* means struggle, it is the same root of *ijtihad*, which is used as innovate. The true meaning of *jihad* is to struggle with oneself against our animal instincts and desires, against our temper, against our sense of pride, against our anger. The prophet said that the highest form of *Jihad* is *Jihad Al Nafs*, the struggle with oneself. The second form of *Jihad* which was highly lauded by the Prophet and said to be the best form of *Jihad* was to speak Truth to Power. It is to say a word of truth to an unjust ruler (*kalimat 'adl 'inda sultan ja'er*).

That being said, *Jihad* also involves taking up arms. However, jihad in Islamic jurisprudence lays down the rules of when and also how one is allowed to fight. The rules of jihad are clear that the religion of a person in no way constitutes a cause for war against him. Second, aggression is prohibited. Indeed, the use of force is only justified in self-defense, for the protection of sovereignty and in defense of all innocent people. Non-combatants are not legitimate targets. All this is constantly tempered by a call for peace:

And if they incline to peace, so you must incline to it. And trust in God, for He hears and knows all.
[Surah *al-Anfal*, verse 61]

Jihad laid down the rules, if Muslims are to fight, of what would be a just war. There were laws governing what was allowed at war. These were the prototypes of the Geneva Conventions, that the West would come to in the 20th century. Already in the seventh century, Muslims ruled that there could be no attack on non-combatants, no destruction of property, no taking of hostages, and no environmental destruction: no cutting down of palm trees and no depletion of wells. This is unbelievably progressive, and was practiced as we know from the entry of Muslims into Jerusalem in the 7th century under Umar, where he gave the Christians of Jerusalem a very benign agreement or contract (the Umariyya Covenant), safeguarding all Christian churches and allowing Christians to continue to manage their affairs. The Muslim law would only apply in cases where there was conflict between Muslims and Christians. Moved by the generosity of the offer, the patriarch asked Umar to pray in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and Umar refused. The patriarch asked 'Do we not pray to the same God?' and Umar said: 'yes, but if I pray

in your church my followers will turn it into a mosque'. They crossed the street and prayed into a small vacant land. Now, this is where the Mosque of Umar stands.

Again, that same discipline was seen at the time of Saladin the Great (*Salah El Din El Ayouby*, 1138-1193), who after the battle of Hattin in 1189, entered Jerusalem, and gave safe conduct to all the Christians including the King of Jerusalem Guy de Lusignan and his wife Sibylla. He only executed Raynald de Chatillon who personally killed Saladin's sister. Indeed, it was under his protection that the Jewish community reentered Jerusalem at the end of the 12 century. Despite the crusaders slaughters and mass murders for they killed men, women and children when they conquered Jerusalem in 1099, Saladin granted amnesty and free passage to all common Catholics and even to the defeated Christian army which is indicative of Muslims' behavior in Jihad. The Greek Orthodox Christians were treated even better, because they opposed the crusades.

The main point of all these examples is that from its early history to its flowering culture in the middle ages, the societies of the Muslim peoples created Muslim cultures that were remarkably open and tolerant, especially when measured by the prevailing standards of their day. What is direly lacking today is the ability among the Muslim religious scholars and intellectuals to reinterpret this tradition in today's terms in today's world, to reclaim the same pinnacles of tolerance, acceptance of diversity and openness to the other that they once held among all peoples of the world.

Examples of a tolerant past

Andalusia was a marvelous mix of different communities, where Jews, Christians and Muslims consorted together and produced great poetry, architecture, science, philosophy and literature. This contrasts with the conditions imposed by the Catholics after the defeat of the Arabs in Cordoba (1492), not to mention the infamous inquisition that followed (The Spanish Inquisition set up by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Castile in 1478 with the approval of Pope Sixtus IV). The Roman Inquisition, set up by Pope Paul III in 1542, supervised all the inquisitions against heretics, and the most famous trial was that of Galileo in 1633.

Contrast this with Arabs and Muslims meeting Greek and Hellenistic philosophy and science:

They did not declare them heretics and burn their books. They translated them into Arabic and wrote exegetes about their theses. They referred to Plato and Aristotle as *Al-Hakimain*, the two wise men. Al-Farabi took what suited him from the legacy of Hellenism and founded the early constructs of the Muslim philosophical tradition. This open attitude to knowledge and learning, this respect for other cultures is perhaps best exemplified by Al-Ma'amun, the son of the great Abbasid Caliph Harun Al-Rashid, who founded in Baghdad *Beit Al-Hikma*, the House of Wisdom, where old manuscripts when translated into Arabic, earned their translators their weight in gold. They recreated the great tradition of openness that prevailed in the ancient Library of Alexandria, and helped the intermingling of cultures. They laid the foundation for the renaissance, and helped bring numerals and the zero from India to Europe (where they were called Arabic numerals).

Indeed, contrary to general perception, it was the Arabs and Muslims, who defined the modern scientific method, and who created the climate of openness and tolerance that allowed science to flourish during the middle ages. Names like El Khawarezmi, El Razi, Ibn Al-Nafis, Ibn Al-Haytham, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, are forever engraved in the honor roll of humanity's benefactors through their efforts at advancing knowledge and rejecting superstition. Listen to their powerful, modern voices as it speaks to us through the centuries.

Listen to the modern voice of Ibn Al-Haytham (965–c.1040) , known in the West as Al Hazen:

“He who searches for truth is not he who reviews the works of the ancients... It is the duty of he who reads science books, if he wants to learn truths, that he should set himself up as an opponent to all he looks at.. [accepting only what is supported by evidence and argument].”

--- Ibn Al Haytham, *Al Shukuk Fi Batlaymous*

Furthermore, Ibn Al-Haytham did lay down the rules of the modern scientific method centuries before the appearance of Bacon, Descartes or Galileo. Listen to his description of how the scientific method should operate, through observation, measurement, experiment and conclusion:

“We start by observing reality ... we try to select solid (unchanging) observations that are not affected by how we perceive (measure) them. We then proceed by increasing our research and measurement, subjecting premises to criticism, and being cautious in drawing conclusions... In all we do, our purpose should be balanced not arbitrary, the search for truth, not support of opinions”.

--- Ibn Al-Haytham, (965–c.1040) *Kitab Al-Manadhir*.

This is a truly amazing description of the modern scientific method, which was way ahead of its time!

Likewise, listen to the voice of Ibn Al-Nafis on accepting the contrarian view, subject to the test of evidence and rational analysis.

“When hearing something unusual, do not preemptively reject it, for that would be folly. Indeed, horrible things may be true, and familiar and praised things may prove to be lies. Truth is truth unto itself, not because [many] people say it is.”

--- Ibn Al-Nafis, *Sharh' Ma'na Al Qanun*.

These are stellar lights in the history of science and in the advance of knowledge. They are our forbearers and we, the Muslims and Arabs of today, should be their proud disciples. We need to recapture that great tradition. It is our tradition, our history, our legacy.

Worthy of note is that the tolerance in society is general, it is not just related to the scientific work. Contemporary to Ibn Al-Haytham in Egypt, Abul Alaa' Al-Ma'ari (973-1057) lived in Syria. Al-Ma'ari, a giant of Arabic literature, wrote poetry attacking religion, God and the prophets, and he was not punished for it, even though it generated a certain amount of opprobrium attached to his name. His work was not only published and known in his own time, it has arrived down to us, now in the 21st century without loss. Even more, he was appreciated for his talent as a poet and a linguist even by those who totally rejected his heretical writings.

This to me is the tradition that Muslims and Arabs should be proud of. They took the torch and carried it for centuries, and if today the torch has passed to the west, we should be proud that we have done our share and more in earlier times, and should strive to take our place, by dint of hard work and innovation, alongside our western colleagues at the forefront of the global endeavor to create a knowledge based, just and tolerant society.

How different these enlightened voices from the past sound compared to the frenetic ranting and condemnations of everything that is new and different that we see and hear everywhere in the Arab and Muslim worlds today! Armed with our past legacy, we can push for the modernization of our values so that they become the values of modernization.

3. INTELLECTUAL CURRENTS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

So now let us come back to the sad state of the Muslim societies of today. Today, the Muslim world is riven with strife. The murderous killing fields in Iraq are fanning the flames of old sectarian disputes. Muslims are killing Muslims in Iraq, in Lebanon, in Darfur, in Afghanistan and in many other places. Intolerance rules.

Despite these harsh realities, some steps towards a better future, a more open future, a more democratic future are being taken everywhere. Small steps, to be sure, but important ones nevertheless. I will have more to say on this point later. For now let me focus on the intellectual currents that are sweeping the Muslim and Arab Worlds.

On Democracy and Islamic Teachings

There is nothing in Islam that teaches despotism or intolerance. The only reference to organizing the governance of our affairs in this world that is found in the Quran is the injunction to consult with the concerned people. *Wa amruhum Shura baynahum*. [Ash-Shura (The Consultation) 42:38]. Some, like Ali Abdel Razek, (in 1926) has argued that it is a call for democracy. Others have sought councils of learned men to be consulted by decision makers, whether hereditary or elected. But ultimately, there is no obstacle to promoting democracy.

The history of the Prophet when he ruled in Madina is clear: as a spiritual guide he was inspired by God and could not be challenged by his followers, but as a temporal ruler, he admitted to being wrong (the palm trees) and was willing to listen to advice and overturn his judgment (the trench). He summed it up to his followers by saying: "you are better informed about the realities of this world".

More important will be the promotion of the humanist values that see the fundamental human rights of Muslims and non-Muslims, of men and women, as being equal in every way. To substitute the concept of citizenship in a man-constructed republic for membership in the Umma, however defined. That remains to be one.

The Modernization of Values and the Values of Modernization

The modern discourse is not just one of humanism and human rights. It is also one that has internalized what we could term the values of science. Science as a way of thinking, as a world outlook from cosmology to evolution, from quantification to logical deduction, has permeated our outlook and our way of thinking. This is still at odds with the shrill self-righteous discourse that permeates much of the Arab and Muslim worlds today. The advocates of that discourse, try to claim a uniqueness to our societies that would justify this disconnect from the global contemporary discourse. They seek refuge in past achievements to avoid confronting future challenges.

So beyond the need for a profound and pervasive humanism, we must also see science as an integral part of our culture, that informs our worldview and affects our behavior. It promotes fundamental ethical values: truth, honor, imagination, creativity, and a certain constructive subversiveness. It requires engagement with the contrarian view and arbitration of disputes by the methods of logical analysis and

empirical evidence. Science requires free enquiry and free speech and dissent from the given accepted views. Indeed, as Bronowski said: "Independence, originality, and therefore dissent -- these are the hallmarks of the progress of contemporary civilization. ... (For)..."Dissent is the mark of freedom as originality is the mark of independence of mind."

Let us reclaim, as intellectuals, our right to reason, let us liberate the Arab and Muslim mind.

Let us use these liberated minds to create a better future for all. And in that framework, the status of women comes to the fore...

The Status of Women

No issue looms larger on the reform agenda than the status of women. It is the ultimate litmus test for whether the Muslim and Arab societies have finally made a transition to the 21st century.

Global experience highlights the emerging centrality of women. They are the true vectors of development. There is ample evidence that the key to development lies in the education of girls and the empowerment of women. These are the single most important actions that any developing society can undertake: the education of girls and the empowerment of women....

Indeed, women's rights are human rights. These must be protected by the rule of law, where all are equal before the law, and no-one is above the law. And speaking from this podium, as a Muslim Arab man, let me be clear: there is no cultural specificity argument that can be tolerated to justify depriving women of their human rights in the name of tradition, or to mutilate girls in the name of custom.

But there is more. Women are not just victims of oppression or vectors of change. They are the artisans of social capital, that lattice of values that is the glue that holds societies together. It is they who repair the torn social fabric of communities in the difficult post-conflict situations. They are the custodians of values, who nurture these values in the next generation

But we must engage all men in this endeavor. Men must not just to be made to understand, they must be mobilized. Women's issues are society's issues, and men must be involved. We need to breathe with two lungs!

Crimes against women, such as rape, trafficking and honor killings, reflect pathological behaviors by men. I am appalled by such behavior from members of my sex, and it is clearly an issue for both women and men.

Hand in hand, empowered women and enlightened men will build that better future we all dream of. We cannot continue to focus on building the women of tomorrow and not worry about transforming the men of yesterday!

The First Freedom

The last few millennia have been one long struggle for the acceptance of human rights, of expanding the scope for freedom of choice and of action ... all of which would not have been possible without the freedom of expression, gained slowly and at great cost, and persistently defended again and again, at all times, in all places, against the incursions that are constantly waged against it by the forces of societal repression.

Freedom of expression is today recognized as a universal gain. It was not always so.

We value freedom of expression above all other freedoms because it is the foundation of self-fulfillment. Without free speech, no search for truth is possible, no discovery of truth is useful, and no progress is possible. Without freedom of inquiry, and of expression, there can be no scientific advancement.

Freedom of expression, defended by law, is essential:

"Morality cannot be legislated, but behavior can be regulated. Judicial decrees may not change the heart but they can restrain the heartless."

--- Martin Luther King Jr. speaking about civil rights legislation

Freedom, as much as imagination and boldness, is at the heart of the search for the truth and the attainment of knowledge. It is necessary to any viable system of self-government. If people are to make decisions and elect their government, if they are to check its excesses and root out corruption, they must be well-informed and have access to different ideas and points of view. Mass ignorance is a breeding ground for intolerance and bigotry, which in turn leads to oppression and tyranny.

An Intra-Muslim Dialogue

As we discuss the need for a dialogue between the Western traditions and the Muslim people, I believe that we need an intra-Muslim dialogue. Far from the cameras and the headlines, we need to work hard to bring Islamic teaching into the 21st century, so that we avoid this perception of a need to choose between Islam and pragmatic approaches to our contemporary reality. Such a dialogue, which I am working on with a few friends, would cover all the "hot topics" of today through various means involving seminars, commissioned papers, survey papers and anthologies of selected writings. Among the topics are:

- *Sharia*
- Democracy
- Women
- Non-Muslims
- *Ridda*
- *Jihad*
- Pluralism in contemporary society
- Human rights
- Gays

- Free speech
- Evolution and cosmology
- Scientific research (ethics)
- The scientific method
- The work ethic
- Economics and finance
- Globalization and the limits of the cultural specificity argument

A New Discourse

Indeed, we need to create a new discourse, and that new discourse, critical, open and tolerant of the contrarian view, will be the basis for the creation of a mode of cultural expression. A new language that permeates the arts, letters and the public realm, that incorporates the new but anchors it in the old.

A new language, where in the words of T.S. Eliot ...

Every phrase and sentence is right

When every word is at home

Taking its place to support the others

The word neither diffident nor ostentatious

An easy commerce of the old and the new

The common word exact without vulgarity

The formal word precise but not pedantic

The complete consort dancing together

Every phrase and every sentence

is an end and a beginning.

T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

Deep Currents

As I look at societies, local, national, regional or global, I am struck by the difference between two types of forces that affect events or activities. There are those that grab the headlines, that are the focus of intense debate and make or break careers. They are undoubtedly important, but they lack the staying power, the lasting effect that real societal change is based on. The other kind of force is the deep currents that affect societal values, where attitude shifts may appear to be imperceptible at some point and then one day, things that were deemed unthinkable become commonplace. Sometimes these deep currents interact with burgeoning technologies to initiate profound changes.

I have likened these two types of forces to the winds on the surface of the ocean and the deep currents that move enormous amounts of water such as the gulf stream in the Atlantic or the el-Niño effects in the Pacific. These deep currents are not easily seen or felt, but they have a profound impact on our lives, they even affect the weather. In the meantime, the surface storms are very important and they can reach hurricane force, and they can destroy and sink ships and drown people and destroy property in the billions. But all scientists would agree that shifts in the deep currents are far more significant even if they take years to become measurable.

The parallels with the discussion of reform is clear. It is the deep currents that have the lasting effects. It is at the level of the deep currents that the Bibliotheca Alexandrina (BA), worthy heir to the Ancient Library of Alexandria wants to act on Egypt the Arab world and through them on the Muslim World. Organizing a debate between the political candidates would make good television, but would not have a lasting effect as arranging for committees of experts to review and revise the math and science curricula of the schools. Tackling the educational system reforms and changing the priority structure of the national scientific research program, to redress the governance of universities and open up the space of freedom for discussion and debate are to name but a few of the components that go into the "deep currents". It is to affect these "deep currents" that the BA targets its actions. We are thus locked into a battle for the hearts and minds of a generation of young Egyptians, promoting rationality, tolerance, openness, dialogue and understanding in the face of obscurantism, extremism and xenophobia.

The means for bringing about reform, transition and transformation, the means to build a really viable democracy is through the support of a strengthened civil society. A civil society that rides these deep currents and acts on the shared values that they generate. Strengthening the civil society is a long-term effort that requires mobilization, dialogue, creation of common positions, identification of opportunities for common action, recognizing successes, evolving a best practice approach, and systematically involving people in the day to day affairs of the communities they live in. That is what we are trying to do at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina.

4. BUILDING DEMOCRACY FOR THE MUSLIM PEOPLES

I head an institution dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the promotion of dialogue and understanding, between cultures and within cultures. We confront the currents of obscurantism, fanaticism and xenophobia with a steely determination to uphold the values we hold dear, among which are the respect for human rights, rationality, the maintenance of a civil discourse and the promotion of personal freedoms, especially the freedom of expression. These are the basic building blocks of democratic systems.

Today, "Democracy" has been adopted as a slogan by almost any group anywhere. Few, however, are ready to practice it!

The Meaning of Democracy

Democracy is a political system that is based on a number of principles that have come to be widely, but not universally, accepted. My own list of what constitutes democracy is:

- The legitimacy of government comes from the consent of the governed: periodically reaffirmed through elections or referendums
- Majority rules, but guarantees for minorities from the tyranny of the majority
- A bill of rights that guarantees fundamental freedoms of the citizen from the power of government, including but not limited to: Franklin D. Roosevelt's four freedoms: Freedom of thought and expression, freedom of religion, freedom from want, freedom from fear (negative rights and positive rights and their treatment)
- The rule of law, with all it requires in terms of a constitution as supreme law of the land, and an independent judiciary
- Equality before the law and due process for all
- Checks and balances on the abuse of power, best achieved by the separation of powers, and a vigorous free press
- Institutional Pluralism, be it in multiple political parties or civil society institutions
- Transparency, accountability, free flow of information
- Participation

Doubtless we can all go on an on..

But Democracy is a system of governance which not only guarantees individual rights and freedoms for all citizens, be they in the minority or in the majority, it is a system that ensures that the minority view is heard before decisions are made. It is a system whose lifeblood is participation by as many as possible, not just in terms of extending the franchise and legally giving universal suffrage, but participation in everyday affairs at the local level, with a vibrant civil society and a vigorous press.

But systems of governance are not born perfect. They are built by the exercise of political participation and the experience of defining the boundaries of the acceptable.

Democratic systems seldom come into being full blown. The US, the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, ...all had to go through many agonies before they achieved not only their current systems of democratic government with their distinctive characteristics, but also the broad based support of the people in the exercise of that democratic system. Perhaps some of the Baltic states went from part of the USSR to a western democracy in one go, but most of the other countries went through the agonies of creating their democratic institutions through a long slow process of self-wrought transformation and institutional consolidation. It would be too optimistic to hope that the Arabs and Muslims would automatically achieve a modern democratic system all in one go.

Like everywhere else there are many obstacles to the advance of democratic practice, even after the principles of democracy have been accepted....Powerful interests defending their privileged position, competing ideologies, uncertain loyalties, corruption .. all mean that every society moves towards its democratic ideal slowly.. two steps forward, one step backward...

Worse, there are those who believe that they have a god-given right to impose their narrow perspectives on all others by force or by ruse. Sometimes they are incorruptible men such as Oliver Cromwell or Maximilien Robespierre... Men who believe that they are entitled by the correctness of their cause to trample afoot the rights of others, who believe that the ends justify the means.

But if they are incorruptible in their devotion to an ideal and their rejection of personal wealth, they are corrupted by power. They are the epitome of the famous statement by Lord Acton: "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

The Current State of Affairs: The Iron Triangle

Elsewhere, I have characterized the struggle for reform as an "iron triangle" of competing forces, with reformers at one point, old line statist, rejecting pluralism and maintaining the authority of the central state through force and brutal tactics at the second point, and the Islamist currents at the third point. I called this an "iron triangle" because by the nature of the philosophies involved, no two points could form an alliance against the third. Each considers the other two anathemas. Within that reality, we the reformers are at present the weakest of the three. Yet, I have no doubt that in the enormous struggle with conservative, anti-reformist forces for the hearts and minds of our people, we shall ultimately prevail.

The tide of history is on our side. The forces of stasis, who would try to stop the march of liberty shall not succeed. They try, Canute-like, to force back the waves. The entire history of the world is about the increasing emancipation of humans, and respect for their inalienable human rights.

Why the Islamists and Statists will Lose

Islamist and statist ideologies carry within them fundamental weaknesses. Whether they advocate the power of the central state or the power of an organized religious framework as the means of advancing society, they have nothing to offer for the future. The solutions for the problems of our societies do not lie in ideology but in the pragmatism that will adapt to rapidly changing circumstances. They do not lie in the promotion of dogma, but in the tolerance of encouraging diversity to unleash the genius of our own people.

Instead, the Islamist currents of today demonstrate

Obsession with women and their bodies,

Obsession with the past,

Obsession with ritual and religiosity.

Like the statist, whom they vehemently oppose, they are

Afraid of pluralism and diversity,

Afraid to lose control

Afraid to tolerate the contrarian view

Afraid to open up to the other...

These obsessions and fears will not beget policies that can respond to the challenges of tomorrow. The new century requires access to science, not just consumption or mastery of technology. It requires the space of freedom to create, to dream and to think of the new and the untested, not the constraints of dogma and tradition. It requires a forward looking vision of a better future to guide our actions in the present.

I have been involved with crafting such a vision and promoting such actions at least for the Arab part of the Muslim world. The Alexandria Declaration, issued in March 2004 by over 167 distinguished Arab intellectuals and civil society activists, spelled out essential reforms for the political, economic, social and cultural aspects of our societies. This declaration was overwhelmingly well-received, and still stands as the single most comprehensive statement of the hopes and aspirations of the Arab civil society for a better future.

5. THE PATH FORWARD

Many ask me what can you people at the BA do? What can a few intellectuals do?

Plenty:

"Never doubt the ability of a few thoughtful dedicated citizens to change the world. Throughout history it is the only thing that has!"

--- Margaret Mead

We have a vision:

From the past we can cherish our memories. Looking ahead, we can hold on to our dreams. And in the unfolding present, we can be creative; we can formulate a vision constructed from the promise of actual things. We can pursue that vision as we follow the call of the better angels of our nature.

Let me be plain, and state my credo loud and clear:

The world is my home

Humanity is my family

Non-violence is my creed

Peace, justice, equality and dignity for all is my purpose

Engagement, rationality, tolerance, dialogue, learning and understanding are my means.

With outstretched hands we welcome all those who share these beliefs...

The Future

We, who believe in democracy and in liberty, are going to win... The statist and the Islamists are standing against the irrevocable march of history. The last 400 years are a global march towards liberating the human mind from the shackles of dogma, and liberating the human condition from slavery, colonialism and despotism to where government for the people, by the people and of the people is not an exception, but the norm. Setbacks can be seen as momentary, mere blips in the sweeping march of history, and mere footnotes for the scholars and historians of tomorrow.

Much has been done much to make the world a better place for all. The twentieth century, was one of struggle for emancipation. The colonies were liberated, women got the franchise, racial, ethnic and religious minorities and non-conformists were all acknowledged to have political and civil rights that derive from their common humanity. Around the planet, more people than ever enjoy these freedoms. This has not come easily, and the blood of millions was the price that was paid to reach where we have reached today.

On the socio-economic front, in the last forty years the developing countries have doubled school enrollments, halved infant mortality and adult illiteracy, and extended life expectancy at birth by an amazing twenty years. Much more is on the way, and we are conscious of the need to share the benefits of our new technologies to make sure that they also benefit the underprivileged and the hitherto unreached.

Democracy is here, and it is spreading. It will inevitably take root as more and more people recognize that the cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy.

But that does not mean that we will win tomorrow. Consider for a moment Renaissance Italy .. Think of Florence: The Medici, Michelangelo and the explosion of talent and liberation that flowed from the renaissance... Who today remembers Savonarola? Savonarola (1452-1498) ruled Florence for five miserable years (1494-98) when he chased out the Medici men, forced the Medici women to burn their fineries in public and to wear nothing but harsh cloth, he confiscated their jewelry and melted it, and proceeded to declare those who opposed him as heretics and had them burned at the stake, until he himself was killed. Today Savonarola is seen as an aberration...

However, if you lived in Florence during Savonarola's rule, you would not have been easily convinced by the arguments of a Mr. Serageldin who would have told you, not to worry, that Savonarola was doomed because he stood against the march of history, that he was a mere blip, destined to be a footnote in the history books chronicling the marvelous march of the renaissance.

So let me answer the question you set to me as the title for my lecture: Yes, Democracy is compatible with Islam. Its tenets not only do not conflict with the teachings of Islam, but on the contrary, they have a sound grounding in a liberal interpretation of its teachings and are buttressed by many examples from the Islamic traditions. Democracy is feasible in the Middle East and throughout the Muslim world. In fact, not only is it feasible, but it is inevitable.. The question is not if, it is when...

When will we go to...

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;

Where knowledge is free;

Where the world has not been broken into fragments by narrow domestic walls;

Where words come from the depth of truth;

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the desert sand of dead habit;

Where the mind is led by thee into ever-widening thought and action ---

Inter that heaven of freedom, my father, let my country awake.