



# DCFR ON THE RECORD

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## *Does Democracy Have a Future in the Middle East?*

*The Dallas Committee on Foreign Relations is pleased to present the fourth edition of DCFR on the Record, an occasional publication featuring interviews by executive director Amanda Schnetzer with selected guest speakers. This issue features Joshua Muravchik, Fellow at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of Johns Hopkins University, who led DCFR members in discussion of his latest book, *The Next Founders: Voices of Democracy in the Middle East*, on Wednesday, May 27. Maintaining DCFR's longstanding adherence to the Chatham House Rule, Ms. Schnetzer separately discussed the future of democracy in the Middle East with Dr. Muravchik. The views they express are their own. The Dallas Committee on Foreign Relations takes no institutional positions.*

Summer 2009 has supplied more than one election surprise in the Middle East. On June 7, voters in Lebanon handed a parliamentary victory to the pro-Western March 14 coalition. Saad Hariri, the 39-year old coalition leader and son of slain Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, is expected to become the next premier. Hezbollah, the Iranian and Syrian-backed militant group, suffered an upset. In conceding defeat, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah said, "We accept these results...with sportsmanship and in a democratic way."

Less than a week later, on June 12, Iranian voters went to the polls to select their next president. When Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei declared President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad the victor, thousands took to the streets in protest and in support of opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi. Mousavi, considered a more moderate politician than Ahmadinejad, appeared to enjoy a comfortable lead in the days leading up to the election. Word of Ahmadinejad's so-called landslide victory thus left Mousavi and his supporters unwilling to accept defeat. The largely youthful protesters chanted phrases like "Free speech!" and carried signs saying "Where is my vote?"

According to Joshua Muravchik, author of *The Next Founders: Voices of Democracy in the Middle East*, "[t]here is no reason why the democratic idea cannot have a rebirth in the Middle East, where it was popular in the early twentieth century." Undaunted by doubters, who point to the excess of autocratic regimes in the region and who consider the prospects for change dim, Muravchik projects an informed optimism.

**The Lessons of Communism's Collapse.** Behind Muravchik's hopeful outlook, at least in part, is the knowledge that "over the last twenty years...democracy has spread rapidly in the world....It has become the norm of governments." Before the collapse of communism in 1989, "democracy was the exception rather than the rule." Today, Muravchik says, "it is increasingly becoming the rule rather than the exception."

To help substantiate the claim, Muravchik looks to the work of pro-democracy organization Freedom House, which reports that the percentage of the world's population living under conditions of tyranny fell from 40.59 percent in 1993 to 36.21 percent in 2007. The absolute number of unfree countries—societies in which



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basic political rights and civil liberties are fundamentally absent—declined from 64 in 1977 to 43 in 2007.

That said, Muravchik is anything but Pollyannish. “Looking back after 20 years, the collapse of communism has had a very marked effect,” he concludes. “On the other hand, we shouldn’t assume that everything will automatically be transformed in the way we want to see it.” Cases in point: China and Russia.

“In 1989 the biggest popular uprisings against communism were in China,” Muravchik recalls. After the crackdown on protesters in Tiananmen Square, “it seemed as if the repression could not last, that it was only a matter of time before this popular desire for more freedom reasserted itself more successfully.”

Yet Muravchik observes that today “the same Communist Party is ruling China just as repressively as it was twenty years ago. China has changed in some ways—it has continued to get wealthier and more developed economically—but politically it really hasn’t changed at all.” In his view, “there’s no prospect for change visible on the horizon anytime soon.”

When it comes to Russia, Muravchik is “mightily disappointed.” “I think it was clear—and I think I said it at the time—that it seemed very unlikely that Russia could go back to communism. But it was not unlikely that it could...revert to some kind of nationalistic dictatorship with a non-communist economy.”

The fact that Russia indeed has met this fate is not surprising to Muravchik, especially “when we think of the human cost of communism.” Just consider “how the Russian people were brutalized and ground down...[how] the Church was suppressed...and how in fact the best people, the best minds, were in large numbers murdered.”

**Democracy’s Prospects in the Middle East.** Sitting in the august Dallas Petroleum Club just before our DCFR meeting, I asked Muravchik whether he sees any prospects for another democratic wave and, if yes, where. Although he dislikes Samuel Huntington’s wave metaphor—waves come in a “fairly even pattern” but democracy’s waves have not—Muravchik does consider the essence of my question. “If you’re talking about

population size—how many people live under freedom or don’t—China is the central question,” he says. “If you’re talking about numbers of countries, then the question is the Muslim world.” Here, he says, “the name of this game” is Egypt, Iraq, and Iran.

First, Egypt. Muravchik recognizes that Egypt is far from democratic. Nevertheless, he appreciates that “it is a country with an increasingly free press, a country that has a fairly long tradition of political parties, [and a country] that has some kind of parliamentary tradition that got corrupted.” In Muravchik’s estimation, “a transition to democracy in Egypt is not so hard to imagine.” Although one man, Hosni Mubarak, has ruled the country since 1981, “he’s very old now and he’s not going to be ruling that country much longer....Changes are coming to Egypt.”

Second, Iraq. Muravchik believes that “for all the troubles that America has had in Iraq...the project of democratizing Iraq has actually gone pretty well.” For evidence, he points to the country’s free press and the presence of “real [political] parties that compete with each other and that coalesce with each other.” Although Muravchik acknowledges that “Iraq can’t be considered democratic until the violence dies down further and it seems like more of a normal, functioning country,” he is optimistic that this could occur in as little as two or three years.

Third, Iran. With our conversation taking place more than two weeks before Iran’s momentous presidential election, Muravchik’s views on the country’s prospects for democracy seem almost prescient. As he put it, Iran is “very far from democracy...[Yet the Iranian] people have a sense of what an election is, of what it means to vote.” Muravchik believes that “if we were able to see in Iran a push against the current system, that the public would want to move to a democratic system...and that it would be a fairly politically sophisticated public able to be effective citizens in the democratic polity.” The dramatic events since June 12 certainly appear to bear this out.

**Exporting Freedom as U.S. Policy.** In 1992 Muravchik published *Exporting Democracy*, in which he championed a place of primacy for democracy

promotion in U.S. foreign policy. I asked whether his views on the subject had changed in any substantial ways since then. “No,” he said emphatically. “The big new issue is whether we can figure out how to do it better in the Middle East.”

Democracy promotion is nothing new in U.S. foreign policy. Take, for example, our two most recent presidents. Elected in 1992, in the wake of communism’s collapse, President William J. Clinton took a keen interest in democracy promotion in Eastern Europe. In Muravchik’s analysis, Clinton was “rather successful” at it. Some might even say that democracy promotion became a cornerstone of Clinton foreign policy, with his administration championing the creation of a democracy caucus at the United Nations and a series of “democracies only” foreign ministerial meetings to bolster adherence to democratic principles.

President George W. Bush also made support for democracy a centerpiece of his administration, particularly in the Middle East. As Muravchik sees it, “President Bush understood something very important, which was that there is something toxic about the politics of the Middle East....The terrorists are no doubt a minority, but they are not a small minority, and they have a fairly wide amount of sympathy.”

Although Muravchik credits Bush for recognizing the need to “encourage change and evolution in the Middle East,” he admits that the administration “did not get very far in developing new policies to carry out this goal.” The challenges Muravchik sees are significant. Public attitudes toward the United States are generally unfavorable. Where pro-democracy groups exist, they “might not want to be identified as having support from America.” Put simply, “it’s just a tougher environment for us to be influential in,” Muravchik says.

At the moment, Muravchik fears President Barack Obama has broken with the tradition of Democrat and Republican presidents alike and opted to “turn his back on democracy and human rights.” This rather than saying “Okay, we’re going to find ways to do it better than Bush did.” While acknowledging that Obama is “a

wonderful politician,” Muravchik laments that our new president may be “laying out a foreign policy that will abandon the attempt to promote freedom... [and] make the world a safer and friendlier place for people living today under dictatorial governments.”

In the immediate aftermath of Iran’s recent elections, Obama came under fire from the critics on the right and the left for appearing reticent in his support for the demonstrators in Tehran. No doubt feeling the pressure, he issued this statement on June 20:

The Iranian government must understand that the world is watching. We mourn each and every innocent life that is lost. We call on the Iranian government to stop all violent and unjust actions against its own people. The universal rights to assembly and free speech must be respected, and the United States stands with all who seek to exercise those rights.

Although Muravchik admits that “no one knows” whether “democracy in the Middle East [is] a realistic goal,” he does believe that “it is possible to picture at some moment something like a wave...in the sense that change in one or two might inspire change in a group of others, just as we saw in Eastern Europe.” Time will tell whether the elections of June 2009 in Lebanon and Iran are more than mere ripples.

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