

**Remarks of U.S. Representative Howard Berman
at the National Endowment for Democracy Conference:
Middle Eastern Democrats and Their Vision of the Future
November 18, 2009**

Thank you very much Carl, you've really given your life to the furtherance of freedom and democracy. I have great admiration for you as a good friend and I'm honored to have the opportunity to address the issues of Middle East democracy and human rights this morning and have a chance to speak here.

As we all know, democracy and freedom haven't fared well in the Middle East in this decade. This has been true equally during the democracy-crusading Administration of George Bush and the first ten months of what is perceived as the more pragmatic Administration of Barack Obama. The question of how to foster freedom in the Middle East remains a policy puzzle for the United States.

As the end of the decade nears, only two states in the Arab world can say they have something approaching a democratically elected government – that is, a government that comes to power through meaningfully contested elections and that exercises real power. One of the two is Iraq; the other is Lebanon. Neither one can exactly claim to be a “Shining City on a Hill.” Both have serious security problems and worse democratic deficiencies, but for now they are the only two Arab states in which there is some reasonable prospect of regular change at the top. On Iraq, apparently, the odds on that change every day, but I think it is still fair to put them in that category.

Every other Arab state is led by an authoritarian ruler - in fact, the same authoritarian ruler, or a close relative, as the ruler ten years ago. Some states have liberalized somewhat - in the case of Kuwait, perhaps rather significantly, I would have said until we learned that she can't be here until tomorrow, by the presence of one of Kuwait's first female Parliamentarians - but each of these countries remains fundamentally under the control of its authoritarian ruler.

Freedom House rates 12 of the 17 major Arab states as "not free." Only a handful - five of them - are rated "partly free." Those are Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait, and Yemen. Not a single Arab state is rated as "free."

This is not to say that there haven't been some important gains in Middle Eastern freedom over the past decade. Women have won the right to vote in Kuwait, and there are now four female Members of the Kuwaiti Parliament. There are nearly 3,500 female municipal councilors in Morocco. Civil society groups have won a measure of acceptance. The explosion of Arabic satellite Television stations has dramatically increased political awareness. Some parliaments have gained strength. Some states have liberalized their treatment of women; the mudawana [moo-DAH-wah-nah] law in Morocco particularly comes to mind.

Still, the question remains: What is the correct US policy toward Middle Eastern authoritarian states, many of whom support US interests and several of whose leaders have many friends in the United States?

First of all, the inbred reflex of the United States is - or, at least, should always be - to support freedom and those who seek it. That's why this terrific institution, the National Endowment for Democracy, exists. I'm proud to have played some role, as Carl mentioned earlier in his introduction, in supporting its existence many

years ago, when it was just getting off the ground and when its funding was under assault by an odd, “bipartisan” coalition of right-wingers and left-wingers.

Since that time, the US Congress has regularly funded NED. And it supports Middle East freedom in other ways, too, mainly through USAID and Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) funding.

The US must always oppose oppression and support the basic rights of individuals. One of the causes I’ve been involved with is the unjustified imprisonment of Ayman Nour in Egypt. I raised that issue repeatedly with Egyptian officials, including with President Mubarak, I remember those conversations quite vividly, during Ayman Nour’s years of incarceration. Nour was released on medical grounds in February, but his ordeal is not over, and I’m sure he would tell you about that. Earlier this week I wrote a letter to President Mubarak protesting the fact that Nour’s rights remain severely restricted, despite his release. As all of you know, Ayman Nour was supposed to be here with us today, but Egyptian authorities denied him the right to travel. His rights are curtailed in other ways as well. He is barred, for example, from conducting any financial transactions. I understand Mr. Nour is listening now via telephone and will speak after I do. I send him my regards and my pledge to remain seized with the cause of his freedom.

I find Nour’s situation particularly disappointing, because his entry into the 2005 Presidential election in Egypt represented a hopeful sign, a possible harbinger of greater openness in Egypt’s stale political system. Instead, the Egyptian regime rapidly closed that door, just when it had been opened ajar.

And now I want to talk about a difficult issue, but I think it is important that this conference and all of you come to grips with our dilemma. I would be less than honest if I didn't acknowledge that it is not always easy to make freedom and human rights our highest priority in foreign policy. There is often a tension between a focus on human rights and a policy designed to pursue other critical national interests.

Egypt is a good example of what I mean. The Egyptian regime is pro-American and generally pro-Western. It has been firmly committed to its peace treaty with Israel since its signing in 1979, and that peace treaty is the cornerstone for what little stability exists in today's fragile Middle East.

So, what do I do about President Mubarak? Do I press him to open up his regime and to hold free and fair elections that well could be won by an anti-American, anti-Israeli group such as the Muslim Brotherhood? Do I not press him at all, in gratitude for his basic foreign policy? Or, do I find some middle way, such as calling him out on some, but not all, of Egypt's many human rights abuses, while simultaneously supporting programs that fund civil society and spread knowledge of democratic practice?

It is natural for me to defend the rights of secular liberals. In all my meetings with Egyptian officials, I continue to raise the outrageous, politically-motivated cases lodged against the courageous Saad Eddin Ibrahim, who was literally forced into exile. (Saad, I think, I haven't seen him, but I heard he was going to be with us today.) Should I do the same for a member of the Muslim Brotherhood? Would I?

And what about the fact that Egypt's human rights lapses probably attract disproportionate attention here because Egypt is traditionally a recipient of a sizable amount of US assistance when more authoritarian states, such as Ben Ali's Tunisia or Qadhafi's Libya, receive far less attention? Is that fair? On the other hand, should that the assistance that we provide be used as leverage to effect human rights change in Egypt? Or is such use of assistance, and effort to condition it, counter-productive, making us feel good but causing the regime to dig in its heels.

Another example of these dilemmas right now is Iran, where our foremost immediate national-security goal is to stop Iran's nuclear weapons program. A significant dissident movement has emerged in the wake of the June 12 electoral fraud. It is a movement that cannot help but excite and inspire all freedom-loving people. Should our policy focus now shift from stopping the nuclear program to helping the dissident movement, which just may be the largest and most active dissident movement in the entire Middle East?

If the goal of our policy is to replace the regime, then survival and sanctions are probably useless as tools of our policy towards their nuclear program. A regime whose highest priority is survival is unlikely to respond to either. It would dismiss our diplomacy. After all, why should it negotiate with those seeking its demise? And the timeline by which the regime could obtain nuclear weapons capability seems much shorter than the timeline for the victory of democracy and freedom in Iran.

One thing we should always do is to make every effort to ensure the borders for free discourse and democratic potential are constantly being widened. I strongly

favor the wide variety of programs that the US government funds and that are implemented through NGOs both American and otherwise, many of them funded through the NED and its component organizations.

Decades ago the great American diplomat and foreign policy thinker George Kennan wrote insightfully about the contending strains of idealism and pragmatism in American foreign policy throughout history. That struggle inevitably will continue. And it continues inside many of us. As a member of Congress who has chosen to focus on foreign policy issues, I wrestle with it everyday.

In the long run, I know that America's most vital national interests are best served by a world that is freer, more democratic, and more tolerant. Those are the values that the NED stands for. Those are also the values our visitors from Kuwait, Jordan, and Morocco who have chosen to live their lives by those values and, more important, to seek to embed them firmly within the political cultures of their societies. They have my admiration, my respect, and my support for those efforts. I am pleased to be among them today.

As one whose heart is with the cause of the people here, I have tried, in these comments, to candidly raise some of the issues that confront me in the course of my job as chairman of the House Foreign Affairs committee.

And I think at this point I just want to thank you very much for giving me a chance to talk and if we have a little bit of time, and I think we have about ten minutes or so, I'd be happy to take questions, or criticism, or comments, whatever you choose to offer.