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Democracy and Governance in the Middle East and North Africa

It is sometimes posited that the Arab Spring unleashed a new era of instability in the Middle East by toppling repressive but “stable” dictators. However, this oft stated thesis collapses under scrutiny as the remaining, supposedly stable regimes are increasingly the locus of conflict and regional disarray. Putting a lie to the “dictatorship equals stability” thesis, the countries that undertook limited democratic reform or were relatively well-governed prior to the 2011 uprisings -- Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan and Lebanon -- have demonstrated resistance to destabilizing forces and continue on a path of limited liberalization, if not deep reform. Countries with long histories of authoritarian government or dictatorship -- Libya, Syria and Egypt -- are in various states of societal and political crisis. In other words, more democratic and open government, where it exists in the Middle East, is actually correlated with the relatively peaceful parts of the region, while authoritarianism and repression have spawned and furthered instability and conflict.

Of course, any typology has exceptions. Iraq, Yemen and Bahrain have been drawn into the rift between Saudi Arabia and Iran and are increasingly influenced by powerful outside forces. Algeria and Oman, with long traditions of independence and resistance to joining regional trends, are steering a third course by avoiding Arab Spring-like protests while pursuing limited change.

Across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a continuing youth bulge matched by dim economic prospects is creating conditions that risk new upheaval if key constituencies remain excluded from decision-making processes. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2016 Arab *Human Development Report*, 60 percent of the population in the MENA region is under the age of 30 and half of these are just entering the workforce. However, unemployment in MENA is twice the global average, regional youth voting rates are the lowest in the world and the rate of youth participation in protests is on the increase. Moreover, refugees in the region make up 57 percent of the global total while internally displaced people account for 47 percent worldwide, creating added pressures on local populations and resource distortions.

A further overlay on this complex regional tapestry is the rapid growth of Russian-style crackdowns on civil society organizations and against foreign funding in support of democracy. Egypt has become one of the world’s most hostile nations to civil society activism, and even Morocco and Jordan have discussed laws that would restrict civil society and foreign funding. In Egypt, political pluralism has been eradicated, and in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia seemingly benign internet postings that do not parrot the official line can provoke harassment or even jail. In light of the crackdown in certain countries, NDI’s approach is to work with local partners where cooperation is allowed, and rely more heavily on online engagement where conflict or political repression put local partners and activists at risk.

Despite the spectre of increased governmental restrictions and the inherent challenges of encouraging political reform in a volatile region, there are several imperatives in the realm of democracy and governance that remain as urgent today as they were pre-2011. Citizens of the Middle East do not perceive that they are witnessing the waning of demand for reform and modernization. Rather, their demands for accountability and transparency have only begun. Supporting the aspirations of young people, providing solidarity to courageous political activists who challenge the status quo and encouraging the political inclusion of marginalized women, persons with disabilities, LGBTI persons and religious and ethnic minorities is just as relevant

today as it was prior to the Arab Spring. NDI is just as engaged across the region as ever and requests for support outstrip funding and human resources.

NDI is grateful for the support from so many key partners, including the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. Department of State (through the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor and the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs Office of Assistance Coordination), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Global Affairs Canada.

The support that NDI receives for democracy work from U.S. and international donors has never been more essential. Such support allows NDI to encourage more democracy and better governance in a tough MENA neighborhood. These programs are a cost-effective way to complement investments in diplomacy and development because if countries fail politically, all other development goals fail -- including trade, health and education. Small sums help stabilize emerging democracies, help avoid military conflict and stem refugee crises that flood international borders. Strong institutions create stronger business climates and enhance the national security interests of the U.S. and our allies throughout the Middle East and Europe. If there is one thing we have learned in this interconnected world, what happens inside these countries transcends borders and regions, especially when it comes to conflict and the flow of displaced people and refugees.

Examples of NDI programming in MENA that have impact far beyond the cost include:

- Campaign schools to train the next generation of women political leaders and help women counter violence, which is exacerbated in conflict zones;
- Teaching the principles of democracy and open debate to youth so they become invested in their country's future instead of radical ideologies and groups;
- Providing governance training to communities in liberated areas of Syria so they become stable and more resilient against extremist groups;
- Helping ease tension between refugees and host countries in Jordan and Lebanon, where displaced persons are equivalent to one-fourth of the total population;
- Election monitoring in Jordan and Tunisia to give voters confidence in election outcomes;
- Parliamentary support in Iraq, Jordan, Tunisia and Morocco to encourage elected representatives to be more responsive to voters, to ease corruption, to include ethnic and marginal groups in the political process and to strengthen institutions in order to consolidate fragile democracies.

As a response to the youth bulge and the increasing political alienation of young people, NDI has emphasized engagement with youth, marginalized groups and movements outside of traditional politics and institutions. For example, Jordan's *Ana Usharek* (I Engage) university and school-based youth civic education program, involves over 24,000 students from 28 universities and 330 public schools across the country, and has spawned similar programs in Morocco and the West Bank. With the influx of 1.3 million Syrian refugees, NDI has implemented a program in northern Jordan to assist communities with Jordanian-Syrian populations to address tensions and implement joint grass-roots initiatives; to date more than 6,100 people have participated, including over 1,100 Syrians.

Activities in Algeria include more engagement with aspiring youth civic and political activists and nascent service-oriented civic groups -- including an increasing emphasis on those outside of the capital. The Institute couples this work with political party support that focuses on building trust and facilitating communication between the political elite and citizens, focusing on youth in particular. With a 15-year presence in Algeria, NDI is one of the few international groups with a formal standing in the country working equitably with the full spectrum of political actors and engaging with new constituents such as disability groups just starting to find a role in political life.

In addition to the new university program in Morocco -- which has seen application rates at double the number of spaces for the current semester -- the Institute is engaging with elected officials and community members in the north of the country. NDI addresses the drivers of radicalization and marginalization in Morocco, while also supporting civic groups that are holding local and national governments accountable on promises for youth employment, women's entrepreneurship, public input in local government actions and the inclusion of people with disabilities in municipal committees.

Unresolved open conflicts continue in Libya, Syria and Yemen, causing instability and excluding any modicum of national unity or governance. Where the Institute has had a presence on the ground, local staffing and partner engagement continues. For Syria, NDI continues to operate from Gaziantep, Turkey and works on creating "democratic subcultures" around the country by building the capacity of local councils and citizen groups through distance learning, virtual engagement and local NDI-trained technical advisors inside Syria. The Institute has worked over the last several years with dozens of local councils across opposition-held Syria, training more than 2,000 council members and staff on how to more effectively provide basic services and engage with citizens, as well as holding more than 1,000 civic education sessions that have reached more than 10,000 citizens across the country.

In Yemen, NDI staff on the ground continue to engage with political parties, youth and women, building capacity for the day that a peace agreement brings an end to active conflict. NDI conducts dialogues with political party leaders, youth, civil society organizations and women to ensure that political processes are not captured exclusively by the warring parties, militias or an entrenched political elite but are informed by a wider variety of voices and interests. A side effect of NDI's ability to convene and animate discussion among diverse, often competing political groups in Yemen is the ability to promote compromise and agreement. In Yemen, NDI has helped:

- convince political parties to stop boycotting elections in the late 1990's;
- facilitate the creation of the first secular/Islamist party coalition in the Arab world in 2001;
- broker an end to certain tribal disputes in Marib and Shabwa in 2005 and 2006;
- create a national political dialog in 2012; and
- convene senior southern (Hirak) political leaders to discuss a common platform in 2014.

The Institute continues its work in Yemen by pursuing consensus among political parties on the framework of a post-conflict political process. The outlines of a lasting agreement in Yemen are clear, even if an end to current fighting remains elusive: a national unity government, a

negotiation about regions and their powers and elections to re-legitimize the institutions of the State.

In Bahrain, Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia, demand remains high for training and mentoring in democracy-related subjects despite the constrained political space. Requests for NDI's help in these countries continues to outstrip supply. As an example, programs for Bahrain bring together moderates who are committed to promoting peaceful community cooperation, and Bahrainis have embedded with Tunisian civil society groups to gain experience. Nearly double the number of women, including several sitting municipal councilors, applied for 30 available spots in a Saudi program and over 250 Egyptians applied for slots in a training program implemented over the past year.

NDI is continuing to implement regional programs to provide support to other country-level initiatives, promote regional solidarity and create safe opportunities for sharing and lessons learning. These include regional gatherings and exchanges for campaign training and improved policy-making among party activists and leaders, as well as advocacy training and planning opportunities for marginalized groups such as LGBTI activists. To date, NDI's State Department-funded Regional Campaign Schools program has involved over 400 participants from 13 countries, representing 92 political parties and 24 civic organizations; collectively, participants report having trained more than 20,000 others in the region. Among participants, 32 reported running for political office, with 10 winning, while another 21 reported running for other elected positions, such as in university bodies, unions and political parties. The Institute also continues to maintain its National Endowment for Democracy-funded online Arabic-language training site, *Taalam/Sharek* ("Learn/Participate"), which has had more than 1.6 million visits and over 132,000 materials downloaded since its launch last year.

In Iraq, the liberation of Mosul will require action to establish meaningful and inclusive governance, keep regional forces that have fought ISIS from turning against each other and avoid a power vacuum similar to the one that originally led to the loss of the area to radical forces. NDI is preparing for post-ISIS challenges with extensive opinion research in Ninewah province and other areas formerly under, or vulnerable to these extremists, to help inform post-liberation planning and the design of conflict resolution strategies to reduce sectarian division. NDI works across the political party spectrum to encourage cross party policy working groups, support the formation of national, multi-sectarian political alliances and to advocate a full voice for Sunni, Shia and Kurds in the national decision-making process. A nationwide poll conducted by NDI in the spring of 2017 found that a new optimism among many Iraqis has opened a window of opportunity to advance Iraq's transition to democracy. Iraqis' demand for inclusive democratic institutions that deliver on citizens' high expectations has built a rare momentum for national leaders to bridge the sectarian divide and develop a strong vision for the future

While restive Sunni-dominated western Iraq and ongoing tensions between Baghdad and the Kurdish region will remain challenges for Prime Minister Abadi, there are a number of recent positive indicators in Iraq. Abadi has announced that national and provincial elections will be held in May, 2018 and new party formations are emerging. There are a number of new initiatives to form national, multi-sectarian electoral coalitions, and political moderates, encouraged and supported by Abadi, are emboldened. Of concern, "Hash'd Al Shaabi" Iran-backed militias, formed to help liberate Mosul and western Iraq from ISIS, show increasing signs of political ambition and their history of human rights abuses sow fear in Sunni dominated regions. The recent independence plebiscite in northern Iraq, an increasingly assertive Turkey and instability

in Syria distract from the modest gains in good governance led by the surprisingly successful Abadi.

Perhaps the unlikeliest of modest success stories in the region has been Lebanon. Long dominated by neighbors and regional powers, still recovering from the effects of a long civil conflict and deeply divided, Lebanon has demonstrated surprising societal and political resilience. With agreements on the appointment of a president and prime minister, formation of a broad coalition government, and successful municipal elections in Lebanon in 2016, there was increasing hope – and likelihood – that parliamentary elections will take place in 2018 to replace the current legislature, which was elected in 2009 and has twice extended its own mandate and postponed polls. The recent news about the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri and the reemergence of the intense Saudi-Iranian rivalry over influence in Lebanon puts an election -- and further progress in governance -- at grave risk.

In conclusion, it is clear that the demands for freedom and accountability did not end with the Arab Spring. But the citizens of the MENA region do not want further upheaval and revolution but would prefer gradual change -- with genuine, long lasting reforms. The proof of this thesis is the stability and relative success of the carefully liberalizing countries of the Maghreb and recent improvements in Iraq and Lebanon. What is more, encouraging and assisting democracy and good governance in the region has positive impact for a small expenditure. The countries that have chosen the route of reform have not generated hundreds of thousands of refugees, do not host or allow extremist groups to use their territory and are not at war with the U.S. or its allies. In an era of tight budgets, the U.S. Congress can rest assured that modest investments in democracy and governance deliver solid results. To that end, I would recommend:

- 1) that the U.S. continue to invest in democracy and good governance programs in the countries that have made a long term commitment to reform and which have shown positive results -- including Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan and Lebanon;
- 2) that countries which are emerging from conflict - such as Iraq - enjoy increased support for the strengthening of inclusive institutions and structures of governance which will help ensure that extremists do not regain a foothold;
- 3) that democrats and local activists in countries in conflict like Yemen, Syria and Libya continue to enjoy the support of the U.S. government as they strive to create and sustain “democratic subcultures” at the local level while waiting for a national peace;
- 4) that democracy programs enjoy multi-year funding streams that allow longer term investments in programs and relationships and avoid stop and go programs;
- 5) that money approved by Congress for democracy programs be spent in an expedited fashion;
- 6) that Congress and the Administration protest unreasonable laws or limits on speech, organizing or civil society activity in the Middle East and particularly criticize the unreasonable limits on foreign assistance for NGOs or NGO laws that impose impossible restrictions on activities; and

7) that USAID and State Department funded democracy and governance programs be extended to the Gulf region with particular emphasis on encouraging the equality of women.

Thank you for allowing me and NDI to share these thoughts with you.