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"ARAB POLITICAL REFORM: CIVIL SOCIETY'S ROLE"

A BREAKFAST DISCUSSION WITH

WITH

DR. ISMAIL SERAGELDIN
Director, Bibliotheca Alexandrina
Convener, Alexandria Reform Conference

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. WITTES: Ladies and gentlemen, good morning. I'd like to welcome all of you to our policy forum, to our breakfast, and thank you for coming in early for a special occasion, which is the visit of Dr. Ismail Serageldin to Washington and to the Saban Center here at Brookings.

I'd like to acknowledge the Ambassador of Egypt and the Ambassador of Norway who have joined us this morning, thank you, and also thank you, Ambassador Fahmy, for your assistance in putting this event together.

Given the events of the past week or so, and the tremendous challenges that the United States is facing in achieving its goals in the region, I think there are many--perhaps many in this room--who are asking whether the Bush administration's ambitious plans to promote democracy in the Greater Middle East have become about as relevant as, say, a manned space mission to Mars.

But this morning's topic, and this morning's speaker, are good evidence to the contrary--good evidence I think for the continued relevancy of a policy discussion here in Washington, as there is in the region, about democratic reform in the Middle East. Because no matter

what may be at the top of the policy agenda here or at the top of our TV screens, there's a great deal happening in the Middle East, and especially in the Arab world, on the question of reform. And one of the prime movers behind this renewed discussion and debate on Arab reform is with us this morning.

Dr. Ismail Serageldin is currently, formally, director of the Library of Alexandria, which is itself the culmination of a tremendously ambitious undertaking and a testament to his determination and commitment to recreate this ancient wonder.

He is well-known to many of us here in Washington from his time at the World Bank, where he served as vice president in several capacities, including for environment and socially sustainable development. In addition to those areas of specialization, he has also, in his career, spent a great deal of time dealing with water issues, and more particular to this morning's discussion, to the question of NGOs and their role in the development process.

So it's no accident, I would say, that it was Dr. Serageldin and the Alexandria Library that convened what was really a tremendous undertaking in March, a meeting of

individuals interested in reform from across the Arab world that produced this remarkable document.

This is a document that is rather far-reaching in its conclusions and in its recommendations, but I think more than anything else, it's significant for the fact that it defines a new role for NGOs, for nongovernmental activists, for Arab civil society in the process of political, economic and social reform.

So we are very lucky to have Dr. Serageldin with us today to discuss both the conference, but more broadly the role that he and others like him in the region envisioned for Arab civil society and the process of reform.

DR. SERAGELDIN

Thank you, Ambassador, thank you, colleagues, thank you, Tamara, for having organized this.

I think, very clearly, the hour of change in the Arab world is upon us. It is not just what happened in Alexandria. Obviously, it is what's happening all over the Arab world, and we must recognize of course that Alexandria is one out of many efforts that have been undertaken in Sanaa, in Jordan, in Morocco, in other places. In fact, even as we speak, people are on their way to Jordan to the

Dead Sea meetings with the World Economic Forum, where more of this is going to be discussed. I was just talking to Saad Eddin Ibrahim a little while ago, and there's a program in Doha a few days after that, and there's a lot of this activity that's going on.

But perhaps the specificity of what happened in Alexandria is really that it was the first time to have a truly comprehensive overview of all of the issues not just focusing on the political reform, but recognizing the importance of addressing economic reforms, and addressing social reforms, and addressing cultural reforms, including such things as the transformation of the religious discourse, the media discourse, the public discourse, but all of this was really out of step and out of tune not just with what was happening in a rapidly globalizing world, in a totally transformed world around us, but out of tune with the aspirations of our own citizens.

And what happened was that the Library of Alexandria provided a space of freedom, a forum where this could occur. Why should it be the Library of Alexandria? Well, first, let me just tell those who don't know the Library of Alexandria is not a library. It is a vast

complex. It has seven research institutes. It has three museums. It has two permanent exhibitions. It has six art galleries. It has a planetarium, an exploratorium, a huge conference center. It has six specialized libraries, the only copy of the Internet archive outside of California, and the big library. So it's really quite a vast complex. It's not just a library. So when people say why should the library do that, it's not just a library.

We retained the name because the ancient library of Alexandria was really perhaps the greatest effort or the greatest adventure of the human intellect, where the idea of universal knowledge was organized, getting all of the scholars of the world, mixing all of the cultures of the world, was given a real and vivid expression for six to seven centuries in Alexandria.

It was there that science was given an enormous boost, including having the first--Aristotle being the first person to say that the earth revolves around the sun. It was there that cultures were opened onto each other and, for those who don't know it, it was there that for the first time the Old Testament was translated from Hebrew into Greek.

And the aspiration of the new Library of Alexandria, of course, cannot be to cover everything in the world like the ancient library tried to do--obviously, that's even beyond the means of the great Library of Congress--but it is, in fact, to recapture the spirit, the spirit of openness, the spirit of tolerance, rationality, debate that used to exist and, oh, how much we need it in this time, in this age, and in this part of the world.

I think nobody here would disagree with me that there is ample need to recreate that spirit of tolerance and openness, and thus the Library of Alexandria was created. It is not a government institution. It was pulled out of government by a special law, attached directly to the person of the head of state as the symbol of national sovereignty and given a mandate that is outside of government, doesn't report to a ministry or to the prime minister and, even there, it says the president will recreate its own management structure which he has by creating an international board of trustees and its own statutes outside of all the laws in Egypt.

That institution adopted, as its goal, to be a forum for debate between individuals, cultures and groups.

It adopted as its objective also to be Egypt's window on the world and the world's window on Egypt, and also to be a leading institution of the digital age. So, certainly, in terms of a forum for debate and discussion, it was very appropriate to host this conference as well.

Briefly, I would just like to mention, and express my thanks, of course, to the government of Norway that has been very active with us. The library building, a spectacular building, was designed by a team based in Norway of architect, totally young, in their twenties, a spectacular success.

But with Norway, we continue to work not only that they support the construction of the project, but they support us in our endeavors dealing with freedom of expression, and we are host to the Beacon of Freedom Project. We have the bibliographies of 55,000 titles that have been banned throughout history. Not all of those books are in the library, but at least the bibliography is there, and we are working, together with Norway, on the Freedom of Expression Conference in September coming up. The minister from Norway is planning to come.

The library, by projecting this philosophy, has attracted detractors, not unexpectedly, but it has also achieved something which is less well-known, and since most people here don't necessarily read *Al-Ahram Weekly*, which carried a very nice story on the 19th of February called, "More Than a Building," I will just summarize because you may have heard echoes of that before.

There was a big controversy last December around the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion". We have a museum, and in that museum we display manuscripts in different showcases, and we have a showcase in which we display curiosities. There is a book of astrology, a book of magic, an execution order, and somebody--and that's a rotating exhibit--and in that we also showed the first edition of the first Arabic translation of the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion".

It was misrepresented as having been put next to the Torah and said that somebody in the library said it was more important than the Torah and so on. This was untrue, because when I withdrew it, I went in person and took it out of the showcase, so I know which showcase it was in. It was in the curiosity showcase.

I issued a statement that labeled it as a piece of hate literature that had been fabricated to foment anti-Jewish feelings and said that it was withdrawn and that it's very inclusion, in fact, had shown bad judgment and insensitivity. That satisfied most people outside of Egypt, but the currents inside of Egypt picked on the library-- everything from letters to the editors, to attacks, to questions in Parliament about how we're knuckling under to Zionism, the United States and others, and why aren't we defending the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion".

I went on the local equivalent of "Hard Talk," an hour-long television program. Forty minutes were devoted to the issue, and I repeated that it was a fabrication, a piece of hate literature, and people who defended that were either stupid or ignorant or both and that they shouldn't be allowed to get away with this because they certainly were doing no favors to either Islam or Arabism or Egypt.

And then, you know, tension was there. Then, suddenly something miraculous happened. That's what was reported in the *Al-Ahram Weekly* piece of the 19th of February. Three eminent intellectuals wrote a small declaration saying, you know, attacking the library, anti-

Semitism is ridiculous, attacking it as knuckling under to Zionism and so on is equally ridiculous. We have to rise above this. We have to work on the real mission of the library, which is tolerance and openness.

And one would have expected something like that to be signed by eminent intellectuals, which it could certainly happen. But the unexpected part--floodgates opened. Hundreds, and hundreds, and hundreds of signatures came by fax from all over Egypt, from an assistant professor of engineering in Asut University. People we had never heard of, suddenly they rallied to the library. But what was important is that they were no longer intimidated by the obscurantist currents and the xenophobic currents that usually intimidate such people. The library had become a rallying space for them, and that really was very encouraging to me, personally, to see that happen.

The issues of the Reform Conference itself have a little bit of history, and I need to tell you about how it came about and where we're going. Very quickly, the design of the conference was intentionally taken up to ban from this first meeting anybody who was not an Arab, and to ban also anybody who was a minister and above, largely because I

heard a nasty tone creeping into the debate in the Arab world, and that nasty tone went along the following lines: all of this stuff about democracy and human rights and gender equity is being pushed by the United States. It is part of a large conspiracy against the Arabs, and anybody who talks about that is really a tool of the United States and of the Israelis.

Now, I have been writing about human rights, and the rule of law and freedom for over 30 years. I started writing in the '60s. I believe that at the time George Bush wasn't even concerned with international politics. While he was still at Yale, I was at Harvard. So, really, I said I'm not going to allow anybody to forbid the Arab civil society from expressing itself because the idea of using a smear campaign against anybody who starts talking about democracy and freedom is really unacceptable.

So we decided to organize a civil society conference, in which we invited the Arab Organization of Human Rights, the Arab Women's Council, the Arab Business Council, and the Arab Academy for Science and Technology, and the Economic Research Forum to join us in organizing this--all of them being sort of pan-Arab-type organizations.

We did not involve the Arab League because it's an intergovernmental agency.

So we came back to the question of saying, if we have these different fora, how do we organize this meeting? And I said it has to be from the bottom up, and we really got enormous support from President Mubarak. Now, people may ask me why go to President Mubarak if you're trying to avoid government? I pointed out that, of course, since the library is formally attached to him, and Mrs. Mubarak is his designate to be our chair of the board, it makes sense, when you are going to launch an effort like that, to inform them.

And I'm happy to say that he not only formally put the conference under his aegis, and he really abided by these rules that I put down, he came and made a speech at the inauguration of the conference in which he invited the civil society to be partners with government in future reforms. He came at 10 a.m. on a Friday and left at 11:00. The official opening of the conference was at 6 p.m.

So, purposely, he and his entourage and the ministers were all gone by 11 a.m., and then 7 hours later, we had the formal opening of the conference. He could have come in the evening if he wanted to, of course, but he

abided by that agreement that there should be no ministers present so as not to influence the debate towards or slanted towards government positions.

In addition to that, I think the preparatory work of the conference had to be done. If we're talking about democracy, we have to practice it in a bottom-up, open fashion. So we invited everybody in Egypt, first, for a prep con to discuss how the basic issues would be put forward. We had the Pan-Arab Organizing Committee. And then after that--there were about 200-and-some Egyptians participated in the prep con, and I told them that they could not all attend the final conference because we wanted really an Arab conference held in Egypt not an Egyptian conference with some Arab representation, and they would overwhelm in numbers the other participants, so we have to keep the Egyptian contingent to no more than a third, which is what we succeeded in doing. The final numbers were about 150.

Two things about that 150, 160 people who participated:

Why that number? Well, because I wanted the declaration to be actually written by those people, not a

document that they will approve and vote on, but actually written and produced by them. We had four segments-- political, economic, social, and cultural. So, roughly, 40 persons per segment would draft a segment of that declaration.

Now, the issues paper was drafted first by the Egyptian prep con, then submitted to the Pan-Arab Organizing Committee of 10 people, and they made comments on it, and then that was circulated prior to the conference, but the actual declaration was to be drafted by the participants, and they did.

It was open to the press in the plenaries, but not during the actual drafting. This, of course, caused problems with the press, saying, "Why can't we be there?" I said, "Because the moment you are there people are going to start making speeches." Inevitably, the press is there, people are taking positions. They hope they will get reported. We want a real drafting committee, where people say, "Can I change this word? Why not that word, et cetera."

So we only kept the press out during the actual drafting. It took 6 to 8 hours of each group to produce

their segment. Then, we worked all night to put the segments together, the preamble and so on. The next morning we read it all out to the full plenary. So people who had been in the political segment heard for the first time the economic and social one. Those who were in the social one heard the political, economic, and cultural, et cetera.

And then we took, in written form, from everybody any additional comments they had. We had 63 comments. We recessed for an hour, and thanks to the marvels of modern technology, not just mobile phones, but also word processing, we were able to introduce the changes, and I went back and reread it to the plenary session in front of the cameras, and it was approved by acclamation by the 160 people who were there--the 150 that were originally planned plus the organizing committee. So that's how we achieved those results.

The question for many is what happens next, and the feeling was, of course, will the governments adopt it? Will the governments do this? And my view is kind of different. I say that, well, you know, governments will do their own thing. This was not a governmental organization. This was a declaration by Arab civil society, and what is

important to me is to mobilize and galvanize the Arab civil society. We have a very weak civil society in the Arab world compared to I've worked worldwide, as Tamara was kind enough to say. I spent 28 years at the World Bank. I've traveled extensively. I've worked extensively, and I can see the power of civil society in places like Latin America, in Asia--very different from the Arab world. So we need to galvanize that.

Secondly, there are a lot of things that people can do where they are without waiting for the government to adopt these. In fact, that is part of the disease we have to change in the Arab world--this notion that only the governments control everything, and we, as citizens, have to sit back and wait for the government to do something like spectators at a sports stadium watching how they perform and commenting about it, but not being participants ourselves. Arab civil society has to start taking on its responsibilities, and we have a whole program for doing that--in fact, even immediately creating, at the Arab Reform Forum, whose website is available, ArabReformForum.org. You can access that, and you will see all the programs that we are doing immediately to follow up on that.

It's not going to be easy. It's going to take some time, but I've had experience with that. You mentioned water. When I stood in '95, August 6th, and I said the wars of this century have been over oil; the wars of the next century will be over water, it caught the attention of the world. The basic reason was we didn't have enough attention to the issues of water in Rio and post-Rio. Three years later, we created the Global Water Partnership, the World Water Council. We held the first World Water Forum in '97. We couldn't get 300 people to attend in Marrakesh. We had 265 people to attend. They created the World Water Commission.

Three years after that, the second World Water Forum, we had 6,000 people in The Hague, and then two years after that, in Johannesburg, in the summit, the Sustainability Summit, that were there, you had the Water Dome, the whole building opened by Nelson Mandela and the Prince of Orange. Water was really up front, and then the third World Water Forum in Kyoto had 21,000 people. It didn't get the media attention because it happened to be exactly when the U.S. invaded Iraq. So the Japanese were a bit out on the media coverage that they got on that.

So the question, therefore, is, it is going to take us time to mobilize and galvanize, but the longest journey starts with one step. Yes, we need government change; yes, we need changes in policies; yes, we need greater cooperation and collaboration in the Arab world, and that will come, but it can't just come from government decisions.

Our experience is that government decisions that are done easily can be easily undone, but when the citizens participate themselves, then the change is lasting. Notice how many efforts at an Arab common market have been launched through the years. And where are we today? We're still struggling with it. If you engage the citizenry, it is a longer road, but a more lasting one, and that is what the follow-up of the Library of Alexandria shall be.

We need you. We need you to help us, but not in the heavy-handed conditionality way. In my years at the World Bank, I've learned that conditionality doesn't work, even for economic reform. If you don't have believers on the other side, you will get simply agreements to the letter of the agreement, but not spiritual agreement. You have to have homegrown champions who believe in the reform process

and, thus, reform is like a tree. You make it grow only by feeding its roots, not by pulling on its branches, and we need you to help us feed those roots--little things like better connectivity, better access to information, more facilitation, a lot of other things.

It's going to be a tough grind, but I think we're on our way, and it's incumbent upon all of us to help this process for the Arabs, for the world. And I would say to all of you, if not us, who? If not now, when?

Thank you.

MS. WITTES: Thank you, Dr. Ismail.

I want to open it up for questions at this point, but let me start with one of my own. One of the common media reactions in the Arab press to the conference was to say, well, this is all very nice, but this is 150 people.

First of all, who are these 150 people to speak on behalf of all of Arab civil society and, secondly, what should we expect when it's only 150? In other words, the reform-minded piece of Arab civil society, these champions, are a small rather elite Western-educated, secular group of people that might not be able to mobilize a grassroots

constituency behind the agenda that they've so boldly set forth.

Can you respond to that?

DR. SERAGELDIN: Well, yes. I mean, the basic reason why we have 150 people and not more is because that's the maximum number in my judgment which could actually sit down and draft something in 48 hours. I could have had 20 people or 5 people draft the declaration, but I wanted more participation.

We have 19 countries represented. That's pretty good. In fact, it is a little bit weak on women and youth, and there's a reason for that, because I wanted name recognition for the people who signed this declaration in their own countries. Name recognition, by definition, is not what young people are best at. They acquire that later on. But when people look at that list of names, and it is prominently displayed, they will see people who all have their standing in their own societies and are very eminently recognizable.

Incidentally, I am very committed to youth and to gender balance. The Library of Alexandria, which we created from scratch, is a prime example. Among our staff, we have

305 women to 324 men, and equally balanced among the managers and the average age of the staff is 26. So I am fully committed to youth, and there are only, including me, there are only 26 people who are over 55 in 1,100 staff. But for this purpose, we needed that 150 people.

Now, the question is how was it received? I think it was overwhelmingly well received. It built upon many of these other efforts, from Jordan, from Morocco, from Yemen, from other places, that were, the bubbling that is there, it captured it and tried to organize it in I think a fairly coherent statement that is comprehensive, provides guidance, but in the end every society is going to have to take it up and develop it in its own format.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. Let me open it up.

Jon Alterman?

MR. ALTERMAN: I remember living in Egypt in the early '90s, when there was a great deal of excitement about one of the other jobs you were doing, which was the whole structural adjustment program that was involved with the Bank and the IMF. But I think the sense of many people was that the excitement and the movement started to dilute over time. The hard things were put off until later, and the

easier things were done early. There was excitement about that, and then things petered out after a few years.

What are you building into the process now to ensure that two years down the line, three years down the line, people don't get tired; people only get more energized?

The other question, which I think is partly related, has to do with the role of national specificity to this as being an Arab issue. Many Arab government officials have been very critical of U.S. approaches to reform in the Arab world for being too regional in their orientation. How do you build that, how do you think about that as you plan your agenda for the future?

DR. SERAGELDIN: Well, very quickly, the first answer, the first part of the question is precisely what I said; that changes that are simply initiated by governments can change--ministers change, governments change, there's less commitment to it and so on.

And if you want really lasting change, as we do call for in the Alexandria Declaration, which really covers all facets of our society, then you have to really take the harder, longer route of building up a civil society

consensus around it. That will take time, but it is enormously powerful once it happens, and I think that is the answer to the first part. That's the difference between how structural adjustment was being negotiated and how this is being launched.

The second part of country specificity. Yes, I mean, nobody can say that the situation in Dubai is the same as Djibouti or that the problems of Yemen are the same as the problems of Egypt. Thus, we need to follow this up with country-specific work.

But what we have laid down here is a common framework, like a compass direction. Now, we have a compass direction, but then every country, depending from where it starts and where its endowments are, will have to chart its own course in moving in that direction, but at least we've charted the direction. We've put the parameters within which we believe what actions are no longer acceptable. We use very unambiguous language, very clear-cut language about, for example, extrajudicial courts should not be allowed to exist, the immediate release of all prisoners of conscience, a lot of minimum adherence immediately by signing all of the covenants on human rights. I mean,

there's a lot of specific actions there, but they are minimal.

We also note that some countries don't even have adequate legislation. For example, we're talking about in Egypt. We want to introduce changes in the political parties law, we want to introduce changes in the NGO law, and we want to introduce changes dealing, for example, with electoral processes. Well, some Arab countries don't have elections, don't have parties. Several of them don't even have laws regulating the existence of NGOs. So, in those countries, NGOs, in fact, are technically illegal in all of them.

We talk about redrafts and changes in the constitution. Well, that certainly applies in Egypt. Some countries don't have yet a written constitution, and we specifically note that and say, "Well, at least they should immediately leapfrog and go to better constitutions than those we went through."

So, yes, national specificity has a big role to play, but why can't we be inspired by the European experience and see how they built gradually over time, yes,

a general European framework, but still allowing each country to develop its own applications of it.

MS. WITTES: George Hishmeh?

MR. HISHMEH: George Hishmeh. To follow up on this, how do you view, then, the Bush administration's ideas for democracy and reform in the area, just a broad brush for the whole region? Do you have any ideas?

DR. SERAGELDIN: Well, I think that the original ideas, of course, technically I will be reminded by some colleagues in the diplomatic circles that there never was a formal plan submitted. It was leaked and published in *Al-Hayat*. And I suspect, sort of as an old Washington hand, this is not an uncommon practice, known as trial balloons, to see how that might work rather than submit it formally to the governments.

I think what seemed to emerge was the old-fashioned concept of conditionality, which I have just said doesn't work, that there was not enough attention to national country specificity. But I suspect that the U.S. administration, certainly, and I believe many others in the U.S. today, would question the wisdom of a heavy-handed approach by the U.S. in the Arab world today. I think that

that's very different from the kind of collaboration I was suggesting, which is a nurturing and supporting one, as opposed to a dictating and imposing one.

I believe that what is happening in Iraq today, of course, is giving a lot of people in the administration pause to rethink the extent to which the post-war reconstruction effort was adequately thought out. Many of the concerns that are now being faced in Iraq were, in fact, identified by people who knew Iraq well, who knew the region well, even before the invasion began.

So I think that, today, there's a lot of cause for people to rethink whether, in fact, a more nurturing, supportive, feeding-the-roots approach, as opposed to a pulling-of-the-branches approach would be more appropriate.

MS. WITTES: Let me follow up on that very quickly. It seems to me that there are some cases where the position of a given Arab government is such that civil society isn't able to develop its roots. Do you think that there's any role for conditionality or for external pressure in cases where government is unwilling to give civil society the role that you think it needs to play?

DR. SERAGELDIN: No. I'm being unambiguous in that. I believe that there are two or three things that occur in that. Either the external pressures will result in the inside the country people viewing those that the, let's say, the United States is supporting with conditionality, and pressure and so on, as agents of the United States. Whatever grassroots support they have had would be weakened, I think. There is a real risk of that. And it is largely seen as interference in domestic political affairs, something that no individual country likes.

May I remind you that right here in the United States there was an uproar when it was suggested that China and maybe some other foreign governments were going to make contributions to political candidates in their campaigns. You all know that. I mean, think of the reaction that occurred right here in the United States. So think further about a brazen foreign pressure that comes out, as opposed to simply supporting a candidate with money--you saw what reaction that generated--what would happen. That is different from supporting the causes of reform, education, transparency, flow of information, et cetera, that can be done through a lot of activities.

Now, somebody will say to me, "Well, how about Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma?" It's very different. She is the leader of the most popular movement in Burma. She is not somebody who, from outside, people say, "Well, this is an NGO that we believe you should support." She was already the leader of a major movement. It's like the ANC in South Africa. External pressure in those cases is different. The mass political movement that had the broad base of support, whether in South Africa or in Burma today, resulted in the regime that was there being totally unresponsive and the alternative leadership that was there was already recognized by the people in that country as the legitimate leadership.

That's a very different situation from what we're talking about in nascent civil society. That will take a little bit of time to grow its own roots. And what you should be doing is supporting those roots rather than coming heavy-handedly and saying, "Support this. Bring this dissident here," and so on, because that dissident will be smeared immediately as being really your puppet.

MS. WITTES: Thank you.

Michele Dunne?

MS. DUNNE: Well, Tamara asked my question, but I'm going to ask a follow-up, Dr. Ismail, because I want to push you on this a little bit further.

The United States, of course, has assistance programs of various kinds, programs that existed before the Middle East Partnership Initiative and then new ones related to that, in which we're trying to support civil society and so forth. So what should the United States or other donors do when they're trying to support civil society constructively through programs and so forth and then the governments in question, the host governments, undertake policy steps, pass restrictive laws, et cetera, which effectively prevent people from being able to do the kinds of activities that we've been funding them to do.

I mean, I think we've seen this happen in a number of cases where we tried to help build up the capabilities of civil society, but then the opportunities of those people to go ahead and practice advocacy and so forth are really very much limited by the government. So are you suggesting that donors should just give up in that case and say, "Well, okay, forget it. Then, we'll do something else," or we

won't fund any sort of efforts that aren't going to be supported by policy from the government?

DR. SERAGELDIN: The latter part is obviously a legal question, but I'm not sure you can fund something that is outlawed by a sitting government in any country of the world. But it doesn't mean that you shouldn't fund it. I mean, you should say, well, if the government says--for example, this happened when we were at the World Bank, and that was all right, the kind of conditionality I'm going to talk about--somebody says to me, "Well, we would like this money to build a dam."

I'd say, "Well, I'm sorry. We don't believe that this is a correct priority, but we'll be happy to fund for you an education project or a health project or a rural roads project because we believe, from our analysis, this is the top priority, and this meets with us. If you don't want to take a loan for education, health or rural roads, well, that's fine. Then, let's just agree to disagree for the time being, and you do not have an active program in that place." But by holding the hand available and making available the funding for particular programs, it does help.

Secondly, you should not underestimate the extent to which transformations do take place. I mean, if you look at Egypt in the last year, the hated security courts that, in fact, twice condemned Saad Eddin Ibrahim, not the existing correct court that liberated him three times.

For those of you who may misunderstand that case, I want to be very clear about something. When people told me, "Was it American pressure that brought about the result?" I said it was the Egyptian judiciary. He had been tried in one of those special security courts, given seven years. It was then taken up to an appeals court, which is part of the traditional judiciary, which threw out the first verdict. He was retried again, and it was thrown out again. And by the rules that enforce, after the second trial, the third trial is before the same court that threw out the first two. It goes before the appeals court. There is no lower court then. It is retried at the appeals court. And of course the appeals court that had twice before liberated him, liberated him the third time in definite fashion.

Now, what happened is that we have abolished those lower courts, so-called lower security courts. That is one step. The creation of the new Council on Human Rights is

another step. The declaration that there will be no imprisonment for any journalist, regardless of what they have written or said, is another step. A fourth step was the declaration that the president made that he was willing to discuss amendments of the constitution.

So you have a range of actions. They are small steps, but that's how it works. You start with small steps, and then suddenly you find it builds up very quickly. And that movement then feeds the civil society, and itself becomes a virtual spiral, where there is interaction with governments, external and internal civil society.

Now, the international civil society has a big role to play. In other words, there is a lot of collaboration between international NGOs and national NGOs all over the world around particular issues, and we see this all the time on environmental issues, on globalization discussions, et cetera. There are these coalitions of NGOs around the world that occur, and there is no reason why, in fact, that activity should not be maintained and intensified. But I try to be as candid as I can be in my assessments.

MS. WITTES: Thank you.

Ambassador Cutler?

AMBASSADOR CUTLER: Thank you. And I know you've touched on this, but certainly in the next six months to a year everybody's going to be watching the great experiment in Iraq. And I wonder if you could give us your views as to what impact either success or failure in developing a true civil society in Iraq would have regionally and on your organization.

DR. SERAGELDIN: Well, on my organization, quite little, very little. But, regionally, of course Iraq is a major Arab country, and what happens there affects the entire body politic of the Arab world. People may ask why bother with an Arab-wide statement? Why not just do an Egyptian statement?

And the basic reason is--and this is something that I've argued over with a lot of my colleagues, also--is that there is an enormous affinity among the Arab world. I mean, in almost any poll that you would take today in Egypt, issues of Palestine, with the public at-large, would rank first, second or third in their priorities for where action is needed. They'll probably say price increases going to fast is number one; job opportunities is number two;

Palestine, number three, or something like that--close to that. It is not so much seen as some sort of remote foreign policy issue. It is not. There is a very strong affinity to what happens in Iraq and what happens in Palestine. So that affinity of the Arab world is there.

And clearly if there is a dynamic, reconstructed Iraq, it will be to the benefit of the whole Arab world. If the morass or the cauldron continues, if there is fragmentation, it will be a disastrous setback for the Arab world. There will be, in the latter scenario, there will be no shortage of finger pointing, both inside and outside, I told you so's and all of that, which is not very constructive. But, nevertheless, there is no underestimating the results of what will happen in Iraq on the overall situation.

I am not sure, I am not sure that the transition has been adequately thought through. I sincerely hope that if the U.S. is today spending a billion a week in maintaining its troops in Iraq, that once there is a transfer to a U.N.-assisted midwife for a new appearance, that support should continue, and support should be given to the U.N., not have the U.N., in fact, stripped of resources

to help in reconstruction, as may be required, because then that would be really conditioning or setting up the U.N. for a failure in its transition, and it may result in the debacle that people are trying to avoid.

MS. WITTES: Thank you.

Naim?

MR. SHERBINI: Thank you.

As I understand it, the declaration was supposed to have been presented to the summit that was to have taken place in Tunisia. In the event, what happened after the declaration; was it presented to the Arab governments? Was it just kept in the public domain as a declaration? What mechanisms did you guys follow up with?

DR. SERAGELDIN: The declaration was delivered by me to Amr Moussa, secretary general of the Arab League. Now, the Arab League is an intergovernmental organization, which means that it would take a government to introduce something. Much as you cannot, as an NGO, address the board of the World Bank, a government has to put forward at the board of the World Bank because only governments are represented at the board of the World Bank, and the same

thing is true of the Arab League. It's an intergovernmental organization.

But we did send it to the Secretary General, and we sent it to all of the Arab governments, partly through their ambassadors in Egypt, partly through the representatives of the people who were present there. But the very spirit of the Alexandria exercise, the way I've described it to you, made me answer a question that was posed immediately after the declaration, "Do you think the Arab governments are going to endorse it?"

I said, "I don't know, and I don't really care."

They said, "What do you mean you don't care?"

Well, because the issue is not just by getting governments to make declarations. I mean, governments, including the U.S. government and everybody else, have signed on I don't know how many times to the .7 of 1 percent of GNP as Official Development Assistance, reaffirmed umpteen times, but it hasn't happened. So the issue is to launch a different mechanism. It is still, to me, this notion of whether the government will adopt it or not is still part of the old reflex.

My friend, Maurice Strong, had the unique experience of being the Secretary General of both the Stockholm Conference in '72 and the Rio Earth Summit in '92. In the first one, he pointed out we have only three heads of state of government. In the second one, we had 114. Now, what happened in those 20 years? The environmental movement happened. The environmental movement created the climate within which things that were deemed impossible became possible. The unthinkable happened.

I mean, when we said that we're going to create a global environment facility, you remember that Naim, people said at that time, "You think you're going to get billions of dollars of taxpayers' money for some bugs in some remote forest in Brazil or Costa Rica?"

And I said, "Yeah, we will," and we did. And the GEF was the only funding that was systematically replenished for three times.

So the environmental movement was largely a civil society movement. By 1972, I mean, if you start to say Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, and all of that, it's 1961-'62. Ten years later, it was still weak. Twenty years after that, it was enormously powerful. All around the

world they changed the whole climate in which things occur.

And that is the kind of change that I want to see happen in the Arab world, where it will no longer be up to some government Minister of Foreign Affairs or Minister of Finance or whatever who may make this decree today and tomorrow change it, as we were being told about what happened in the structural adjustment agreement, well, it wasn't in the form of structural adjustment loan, but I mean the economic reform measures that we have seen backsliding in the last few years. So I think that's what I'm trying to launch.

And in that context, you see, it becomes less important whether the Arab governments endorse it today. It becomes more important whether or not actual change on the ground occurs country after country after country, issue after issue after issue. It's a longer haul, but it's a more lasting change.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. I'm going to start to group questions to make sure that we have a chance to get everyone in.

So Khaled and Amy?

MR. DAWOUD: I'm Khaled Dawoud from *Al-Ahram* newspaper. I actually had two questions.

First, we've read so many reports about the possibility that the U.S. administration will adopt the Alexandria Declaration, in one way or the other, and later present it to the G8 leaders in their upcoming meeting in June. So I wonder if you have any comment on that.

And my second question is concerning the structure of the conference and also follow up on the fact that these are 150 intellectuals, while the fact that we know the Islamists, for example, in Egypt and the Arab world have a very strong influence these days. I mean, I wonder whether by side-lining them, you are basically starting from the true situation on the ground, to a certain extent in the Arab world, and whether you plan to issue some sort of report saying how our countries are getting closer or further from the targets that you have specified. You know, maybe that would be one useful means to assess.

Thank you.

MS. WITTES: Amy?

MS. HAWTHORNE: Thanks. My question is about the concept of civil society. As I understand it, civil society

refers not to nongovernmental individuals, but to individuals coming together for collective action in groups, and movements, and organizations.

And my understanding is that the majority of the people who signed the Alexandria document are nongovernmental individuals, but they don't have a connection to groups or associations or movements, and we also know that across the Arab world the rights of association are severely restricted, including in your own country.

So how can the people who signed this document advance those rights, not just of individuals to speak out and express opinions, which I think has improved tremendously in the Arab world in recent years, but to actually come together and work in movements not just on social issues, but on political issues?

MS. WITTES: So two questions dealing with inclusivity and exclusivity, I guess.

DR. SERAGELDIN: Very quickly. For Khaled, U.S. adoption, well, it would be nice, but the spirit is more important than the formality, the spirit I was talking about earlier on.

The Islamists, we did invite four or five Islamists to attend, including Mohammed Selim al-Awa, including Fahmy Huweidi, including Tareq al-Bishri, and Ahmed Kamal Aboulmagd, and Khalid Zaffaroni [ph]. But in effect, what happened, the first three couldn't attend. It was done at fairly short notice.

And you may ask, why was it done at fairly short notice? It was because when we discussed with the president of Egypt that we wanted to do this, and this was something we wanted to do, he said, "Fine, and I'll put it under my aegis and so on." But then I think he made a very sensible statement. He said, "I hope that if you have something to say about Arab-wide reform, you will produce it before the scheduled summit."

And we said, "Okay. We'll produce it before the scheduled summit." And that meant that we had to finish it by mid-March. Now, that meant that some people had prior commitments that they couldn't change.

The broad Islamists current--the what I would call the enlightened Islamists were all invited, but it is true that some people basically are demanding a theocratic-type state in the Islamist current. Therefore, the general

thrust of democracy, tolerance, diversity, et cetera, would not necessarily fit into that current of it, and that maybe was less represented, but it was not an effort to necessarily have everybody come. There was a lot of self-selection. The net was thrown wide, invitations were extended, but some people did not necessarily feel comfortable with it.

The reporting mechanism. Yes, we've even invited nominations for a follow-up committee to do that, and we have an observatory or "observatoire," which is designed to, in fact, monitor and provide good feedback, as well as strengthening the networking of the civil society.

Now, individuals versus organizations, it was purposeful, and the basic reason why I wanted individuals and not organizations is I don't want somebody to say, "I agree with everything here, but I can't sign because I have to go back to my board."

I mean, we said, "You're invited in your personal capacity, as somebody who's important and prominent in your own country, and you're here to express your views as a citizen."

Now, further action with organizations will come later on, and the rights of associations to function is one of the issues that we specifically addressed here. And, in fact, in President Mubarak's speech, there was a willingness to recognize also the possibility of liberalizing that climate a bit. So we're hoping that that will also happen in Egypt, at least, speaking for my own country.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. Thank you all for your patience, and go ahead.

UNKNOWN: My question has been touched on, but I wanted to know how do you nurture civil society, while guarding against extremist elements?

DR. SERAGELDIN: Well, I'm glad you asked this question because I think this is the single most important question that I have had today, and maybe I should have addressed it in my opening address.

There is an argument being made in certain quarters that the reason that we have restrictions on grassroots civil society movements is because they can be fronts for terrorist organizations and extremist elements. That's undoubtedly true, except that my belief--personal belief--is that the way to fight that is, in fact, to open

the door wide; that what ails the problems of democracy are best treated with more democracy, not less, and that, in fact, contrary to what governments imagine when they do that, their restrictions tend to apply to the law-abiding citizens, like myself, who only function within a legal framework, but in fact that the extremist elements use other fora.

As you well know, Friday mosque meetings, post-Friday players, et cetera, et cetera, they don't need a formal authorization from the government. So you end up, in fact, suppressing the alternatives. The best way is to open up all of the alternatives. When you open up all of the alternatives, let thousands of voices come forth, and then the Islamists will not be able or the extremist elements will not be able to cast themselves into the role of being the only alternative to the existing government, so that anybody who has a dissatisfaction with the existing government would therefore rally around to their point of view because there's nobody else.

If you say, no, that in fact reforms are happening on many things, if your primary objective is environmental issues, there's an environmental NGO; if your primary

objective is to increase women's participation in the next election, there are groups working on that; if your primary issue is dealing with poverty reduction ala Habitat for Humanity, there are groups dealing with that.

And there are a lot of educational groups, a lot of activity because every one of those programs generates interaction with other people, throwing ideas out, discussion, and that is the oxygen that you need for civil society to flourish, it is that constant interchange of ideas and free flow of information.

And that is why one thing that the U.S. could do to help us enormously is reduce the incredibly high charges for broadband Internet connectivity. This is not a joke. I have mentioned this at very high levels in the U.S. government. For me to move to 155 megabytes per second connectivity at the Library of Alexandria, the charge, and by an American firm, is over \$50,000 a month. Now, to put it in perspective, that is the salary of over 400 young university graduates per month just for connectivity.

Now, when you compare that this is over 10 times what is charged inside the United States and that the incomes in the United States are about 30 times higher than

the incomes in Egypt, you start seeing how the free flow of information and the penetration of the Internet, despite the government's best efforts, and that Ahmed Nazif is doing a great job in this part, are really curtailed. So there is a lot to be done in there.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. With your permission, what I'd like to do is just collect the last set of comments together and then have you make your closing remarks.

Ellen Laipson?

MS. LAIPSON: Thanks. I also wanted to dig a little bit more on this question of whether you see this movement that you're--maybe movement is too formal a word--but this process that you've stimulated as an alternative to an Islamist model, of whether, either implicit or explicit in the Alexandria gathering, is the idea that a set of values that are virtually universal can draw on a part of society and be an alternative to a more particularist cultural model, which would be the Islamist model.

And I guess one of my questions is whether the word "secularism" comes up as a value. I had felt, for a number of years, that people who are personally secular were inhibited from talking about that as a particular way of

lifestyle and set of values because the Islamists so dominated this sort of discourse. Is that changing? Is it now possible to stand up and say we represent a set of humane values of the rights of the individual, et cetera, that religion is a private matter and not a public matter? So I'd like to hear a little bit more on that issue.

MS. WITTES: Thank you.

Melissa?

MS. MAHLE: I'd like to just return to the Arab League Summit for a moment. You have said that, yes, you're focusing on civil society issues and developing roots, but the Arab League is going to be meeting, and they are going to be discussing reform. And, yes, indeed adoption is not-- the words are not what you're looking for, but certainly this is a forum that can be used to advance an agenda.

So what would you like to see come out of this summit and what these leaders will do?

MS. WITTES: Thank you.

And Jamal?

MR. EL-HINDI: You've mentioned several times the environmental model as a vehicle or as something that has inspired you, at the very least. Where is the environmental

movement in the Middle East? And I raise that question because, to the extent that you say that there is a lack of civil society there, I think that you've alluded to the fact that it's not just a governmental issue, it is a social issue as well.

And in countries where you can go into any house and it's immaculate, but you walk in the streets and it's fairly dirty, I've always wondered when the populace might take a certain amount of interest in that, vest themselves in the community. And it seems to me that within what you're doing, you might see the environmental movement as one of those sparks that gets people organized. Is there a particular emphasis on that?

MS. WITTES: And the last shall be first and the first last. Martin?

AMBASSADOR INDYK: Mine is really just a very quick question on tactical agenda. The example you gave of connectivity is a very interesting one, I thought, but I'm wondering what other tactical ideas you have in terms of the tactics of how you build civil society in these different Arab countries.

DR. SERAGELDIN: Well, thank you for these questions. Let me take Ellen Laipson's questions first.

Yes, of course, it is an alternative model. I mean, the Alexandria Declaration constitutes a vision of what a society should look like in the Arab world: the political dimensions, the economic dimensions, the social and the cultural dimensions. And in the cultural dimensions, we are calling for a change in the religious discourse, as well as the media and public discourse.

So, yes, it is clear. It is one that is based on pluralism, on tolerance, on diversity, and to recognize that Islam is a very important part of our cultural identity, but not all Arabs are Muslims and not all Muslims are Arabs. And while the two circles intersect, they are not identical. And, thus, in the Arab world, there has to be room for that.

Now, secularism is seen, in fact, by some, and regretfully, certainly in many parts of the Arab world, the debate has resulted in the word carrying certain baggage. It is seen much closer to the French model which, as you know today, is resulting in the big debate about the head scarves. The head scarf issue is confronted in the U.K. and Norway very differently from the way it is in France in

terms of the level of tolerance that they have for this kind of garb. The French are finding themselves, incidentally, in a difficult situation because there was a demonstration by the Sikhs saying, "What about us and our turbans?"

And the French Minister said, "I wasn't aware there was a Sikh community in France." But this is a question, and it has taken that baggage on.

But, in fact, if you consider that the Norwegian or the British or the American models of secularism do co-exist with a strong religious action throughout the civil society, so there is room there. But the word "secularist"--"almaniyya " --in the Arabic political lexicon, has taken on a closer connotation to the French notion of "laisette", not to the Anglo-Saxon notion of secularism, which is much more inclusive.

Now, on the Arab League Summit, I mean, it would be nice to have the states adopt a declaration, it's just that this is not the be all and end all if you take the philosophy of building a movement. So, yes, it's nice. I mean, nobody would object to having the governments adopt it, but it is not really, in fact, I hope it would not lull people into thinking that therefore we've achieved success.

Success that's achieved in a few months that way is not the same as really the grassroots part.

And that brings me to Jamal's question about the environmental model. You're right. There is a weak environmental movement in the Arab world, but that is part of what I mentioned at the beginning and said there is a weak civil society compared to what I know of in Asia and in Latin America, for example, places that I have worked in a lot. And it is the same reason as any other part of the civil society movement.

Can it be a spark? It could, in some ways, but I think there are--and that will come to the question that Martin asked of the tactical agenda. My tactical agenda is that the next conference--we have four or five conferences planned between now and next year, but they are not going to be rehashes of what was done here. They are all building blocks in the direction of the reform that is embedded here. So we're going to have meetings of technical experts to address the issues of why we are not able to increase inter-Arab trade or how we can harmonize financial regulations. These types of efforts are intended to produce what we would consider viable proposals for legislation, for adoption,

intergovernmentally and at the government level.

Incidentally, we would welcome technical support and participation of others in these sorts of efforts.

But the main thing is that for the conference of March 2005, which we have already announced, I want to shift towards best practices and examples of success by the Arab society throughout the Arab world. So I am contacting many of the people who participated in Alexandria, some who wanted to participate, but couldn't, and ask them, in fact, to prepare the best success cases that they can in any of the four segments they have.

And then what we want to do is to change, next time we meet, it will be really to discuss the best practices, to be inspired by each other's successes-- somebody in Lebanon looking at what somebody in Morocco did and saying, "My God, you know, I could do something like that, too," and so on.

If we have 60 to 70 success stories being presented, with an exhibition maybe and proper media coverage, the whole tenor of the dialogue will change. It will not be the self-flagellation, "Oh, my God, nothing is happening." It will be the recognition where successes

have happened and what to do about them and maybe, therefore, build on strength, as well as confront the shortcomings.

So the last part is of course the observatory that has been discussed, but I don't believe that the notion of confrontational aspects or saying to this government, "Here is a scorecard. You didn't do this, and you didn't do that," is necessarily going to be the best way of achieving the results--I think building on successes where they are, encouraging that.

And then of course after this initial effort, we are broadening and inviting people from, for example, Malaysia, and East Asia, and Singapore to see how their success stories will inspire others. We are also trying to involve a lot more of the young people, and especially the young women, in our next rounds of discussions after this initial declaration has been made.

So there's a whole tactical agenda on which I believe in any one of those areas we could certainly benefit from a lot of support and a lot of dialogue from the United States and from others as well.

MS. WITTES: Well, thank you, Dr. Serageldin, for a fascinating presentation, a hopeful vision, and we hope that we can partner with you in the future.

Thank you all for coming.