

Remarks for the
Democratic Security in a Time of Extremism and Violence
NGIC and BA High-Level Meeting
Cairo, Egypt
14-16 January 2017

Panel II on
Terrorism and the Constitution – A Framework for Action

Amine Gemayel
President of the Republic of Lebanon, 1982-1988

Introduction

I would like express sincere thanks to our distinguished hosts of the Nizami Ganjavi International Center and the BA for organizing this important, high-level meeting on the theme of “Democratic Security in a Time of Extremism and Violence.”

In my brief remarks, I hope to share some reflections on the twin threats of extremism and violence and suggest some possible remedies to them in the fields of educational reform, economic development, and improved governance.

And—most crucially in the context of our present consultations—I would then like to examine the critical role of democracy and constitutionalism in meeting the grave challenges we face globally, regionally, and within so many countries around the world.

Twin Threats of Extremism and Violence

Ladies and Gentlemen, it takes no great leap of imagination or analysis to conclude that the world community is today buffeted by the twin threats of extremism and violence.

Most dramatically, in the Middle East a so-called Islamic State has seized control over a vast—although now contracting—self-declared Caliphate devoted to exporting mayhem and chaos; in Central Asia, the allure of extremism gathers pace; and in Southeast Asia, terrorist groups have demonstrated remarkable resiliency, recovering quickly when members are arrested or killed.

Nor are the established democracies of Europe and North America immune to internal extremism and violence. In the U.S., the phenomenon of “lone wolf” attacks is a rising danger, while in Europe a seemingly unstoppable series of spectacular terrorist strikes continues.

Terrorism, in short, has become a foremost threat to international, national and human security, with an immediacy that eclipses even concerns about the seemingly theoretical catastrophe of nuclear war.

To gain a necessary and broader view of our predicament, we must begin by grasping that the threats of extremism and violence are not new, even if their scope and tempo dramatically increased in the years since the 9/11 attacks against the United States.

With respect to the modern phenomenon of terrorism—and in particular terrorism inspired and sustained by religious extremism—no country is more painfully attuned to its destabilizing effects than is mine, Lebanon. Having suffered its ravages, Lebanese officials as far back as the 1980s tried to warn the world what would happen if the problem were not dealt with comprehensively, and on a multilateral basis.

During a 1983 state visit to Britain, for example, I addressed the threat of terrorism in these terms:

The fire of the ordeal that has touched the people of Lebanon will very soon, if unchecked, spread throughout the Arab world and the Middle East....The livelihood and the existence of the European nations will in turn become threatened, resulting in a wider conflict, unless something is done now to avert the danger. Taking small risks today obviates the need for greater risks to be taken tomorrow.¹

Turning to more recent history, we can state that since 2001 the international community has implemented a range of responses to terrorism, but unfortunately these exertions have not prevented either the geographic spread or increased lethality of extremism.

¹ This excerpt, as well the full text of the statement, can be found in Amine Gemayel, *Peace and Unity: Major Speeches, 1982-1984* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1985), 149-163 (quotation on p. 154).

In light of this reality, I would now like to speak for a few moments about some remedies that could help move the Middle East region generally—and the Arab world particularly—away from the prevailing “politics of turmoil” and toward a new “positive stability.”

Role of Educational Reform, Economic Development and Improved Governance

If the Arab peoples are to defeat extremism and violence, then we will require a range of non-lethal solutions to supplement and ultimately supplant the lethal remedies that have so far predominated under the slogan, “war on terror.”

In my view, the Arab world must address four key areas: First, enhancing the role of Arab youth through a comprehensive program of educational reform, especially to improve quality and access at all levels.

Second, reducing poverty through socio-economic development, which will eliminate a perpetual source of instability and extremism.

Third, establishing accountability in governance, in part by adopting the kind of checks and balances that prevent dangerous concentrations of power.

And fourth, partnering with the new media to foster a culture of democracy.

In the limited time we have I would like to address the vital dimension of *governance*. From my perspective, Arabs are confronted today by three competing realities of governance: the old and bankrupt failed states, the egregious “Islamic State,” and what can be called citizen-states.

I submit that over the long-term only vigorous support for human rights, pluralism, and democracy as practiced by citizen-states can stabilize individual Arab societies and over time the Middle East region as a whole.

What is the definition of a citizen-state? A citizen-state, in my view, is one in which the following elements, among others, apply: the wellbeing of the individual is paramount; politics and religion are separated; executive governance is transparent, respectful of dissent and media scrutiny, and accountable to parliamentary oversight; elections at all levels are free and competitive; the judiciary is independent; and pluralism flourishes in the form of gender equality, religious tolerance, autonomous civil society, and cultural expression.

The bedrock principles of citizen-states are democracy and constitutionalism, and I would now like to share some thoughts on how we can promote these concepts within an Arab context.

Role of Democracy and Constitutionalism

If at this historical moment prospects for the triumph of Arab democracy appear grim, then we as analysts must also concede that *global* democracy has in recent years entered a crisis period.

Democracy's position appeared to be very different at the turn of the twenty-first century. At that time, democracy appeared as a surging wave that would not break: the recent collapse of the Soviet Union seemingly secured democracy in Europe for the long-term; democracy for the most part had spread throughout Latin America and was making significant progress in Asia; only Africa and the Middle East lagged behind in terms of democratization.

Fast-forward to today, and democracy is everywhere suffering the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Even the old, established democracies are producing a crop of leaders who express skepticism and even outright contempt for basic democratic norms like openness and pluralism.

Within a global context in which democracy appears to be at bay, the Arab world provides a cautionary tale of what non-democracy inevitably produces, namely extremism and violence on a massive scale.

Fortunately, prominent examples from Arab countries provide hope that key political and religious circles are beginning to embrace democratic precepts.

In June 2011, for example, Grand Imam Ahmed al-Tayyeb, Sheikh of the prestigious Al-Azhar in Cairo—the world’s leading center of Sunni Muslim thought—issued a significant declaration on democracy. This statement reads, in part:

Al-Azhar embraces democracy based on free and direct voting....Islamic precepts include pluralism, rotation of power, determining specializations, monitoring performance, seeking people’s public interests in all legislation and decisions, ruling the state in accordance with its laws, combating corruption and ensuring the accountability of all people.

Given the centrality of Islam in the Middle East, the movement for Arab democracy and constitutionalism must remain attuned to Muslim understandings of these concepts; this can be done, in part, by engaging and building on the perspectives articulated by Al-Azhar.

Here I should also like to mention a charter I drafted and issued in January 2012 during a conference held in Lebanon and jointly organized by the Lebanese Kataeb Party and the Centrist Democrat International. Among its key provisions, the charter **endorses** a strong civil state, **upholds** the inviolability of freedom, **supports** gender equality in all spheres of life, and **affirms** religious, ethnic, and political pluralism.

The challenge for the peoples of the Middle East at this crucial moment in history is to demonstrate that we are capable of achieving pluralism, freedom, and modernity. Now is the time for our troubled region to

transcend intolerance in all its forms—whether religious or political—and define a concept of citizenship and belonging based on universal values of democracy and constitutionalism.

Conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen, amid a Middle East region and an Arab world characterized by chaos and conflict of biblical proportions, I have tried to sound an optimistic note. I have done this because I truly believe that the future of the Arab peoples is bright.

Amid the daily parade of disasters that we read about or experience directly, we must not forget that a counter-narrative exists, even if it receives less attention than it deserves. This is a story of the Middle East as a zone of growth; in fact, remarkable growths in key indicators like human capital, entrepreneurial spirit, Information Technology, and natural resources.

I believe that among the great positive trends in the Arab world are a range civil society programs and initiatives that are sustaining and energizing this “growth narrative.” For example, across the Arab world Information Technology and new media serve as digital safe harbors in which the forces of moderation are pursuing their just struggle against violence and extremism.

Similarly, any optimistic assessment of democracy and constitutionalism in the Arab world today must take note of developments in Tunisia, the very birthplace of the Arab Awakening.

The constitution promulgated by Tunisia’s broadly representative National Constituent Assembly emerged from a protracted process of consultation and negotiation, one guided by a spirit of common enterprise and rational compromise.

And the resulting charter enacts decisive measures such as maintaining a civil state, guaranteeing gender parity in elected bodies, and enshrining universal human rights—including, significantly, religious freedom.

With its progressive constitution, Tunisia takes its place alongside Lebanon as the Arab world's second internally created democracy. Hopefully, Tunisia will serve as an inspiration and model for the whole region.

Finally, I would like to conclude with a proposal that could help generalize the Tunisian experience across the Arab world. I should like to propose for discussion the formation of a “Center on Arab Democracy” comprised of prominent Arab scholars, thought leaders, and statesmen—both secular and religious.

This Center on Arab Democracy would have as its mandate the formulation of a consensus Arab view on democracy and constitutionalism. Such a Center could also map out the dynamics and details of a partnership between the established Atlantic democracies and emerging Arab democracy.

In this way, the Center could help recapture and refocus the fleeting consensus of the Arab Spring and help contribute substantively to the achievement of peace, prosperity, and democracy in the Middle East.

I firmly believe that democracy *is* the future of our region and that the chaos of today will be followed by the dawn of progress guided by the star of freedom.

Thank you.