

*Report*

*of*

*The Pocantico Conference on  
Democracy Education in the  
Middle East and Muslim Africa*

Sponsored by

The Council for a Community of Democracies

The Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy



The American Forum for Global Education

March 18–20, 2005

The objective of mapping the opportunities and barriers for the promotion of democracy education in the Middle East and North Africa was the subject of a March 18–20, 2005 conference that brought together 30 specialists from the region as well as from Senegal and Nigeria, Europe and the United States. NGO leaders from Egypt, Jordan, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Libya, Tunisia, Senegal and Nigeria met with participants from Germany, the United States and the Netherlands to produce this report and its recommendations. The report is being provided to the Ministers of the governments of those countries attending the Community of Democracies April 2005 Santiago Conference. The Council for a Community of Democracies, the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy and The American Forum for Global Education jointly sponsored this Conference. The Conference flows from one held at Pocantico in June 2003 that produced a *Global Strategic Plan on Democracy Education* for the Community of Democracies.

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## Introduction

The centrality of democracy education in fostering and consolidating democracy around the world was recognized by the Ministers participating in the June 2000 founding Warsaw Conference of the Community of Democracies (CD). At the Community of Democracies' second Ministerial meeting in Seoul in November 2002 that priority given to democracy education was reaffirmed and participants were urged to "promote a culture of democracy through education". The nongovernmental meeting of that same Seoul Conference gave considerable attention to democracy education and called upon the Council for a Community of Democracies (CCD) to produce a Global Strategic Plan for Democracy Education. Responding to that appeal CCD organized a first Pocantico Conference in June 2003, a gathering that produced that Plan, a document that has served as a roadmap for nongovernmental organizations in their dialogue with governments and nongovernmental organizations in many countries.

Subsequent to the first Pocantico Conference, international events and the pioneering work of many NGOs suggested that the insights and perspectives of the Global Strategic Plan would be useful in exploring the needs of the Middle East and North Africa. It was therefore determined that a second Pocantico Conference would be organized for the purpose of making recommendations to the April 2005 Santiago Third Ministerial Conference of the Community of Democracies. A major objective of that second Conference was to ensure that invaluable European perspectives and experience be brought to bear on the subject and to seek ways to forge European-American partnerships to address the needs of the region.

This report seeks to define the nature of the problems confronted in the Middle East and North Africa with respect to democracy education and suggests ways in which the citizens of the region may best become acquainted with the fundamentals of democratic ideas and values as they relate to the needs of their societies. In so doing it attempts to address both the "freedom deficit" and the "education gap" cited in recent United Nations Development Program's Arab Human Development reports as undermining the aspirations of the people in the region for a better life.

We believe this report and its pragmatic recommendations offer an opportunity to the governments represented by the Ministers of the Community of Democracies gathered in Santiago to go beyond declarations and begin a commitment to the real work of making it possible for NGOs and school systems to properly educate citizens of the Arab world about democracy and their role in making it possible.

As the Pocantico participants recognize, that will require action and resources on the part of the donor community. The Santiago gathering offers a chance to ring the bell for a call to action. We call upon the Ministers participating in the Third Community of Democracies Conference to consider carefully the recommendations contained in this report and act on their implementation. We also call upon the organizers of the International Centre for Democratic Transition hosted by the government of Hungary to give high priority to both the implementation of the Global Strategic Plan for Democracy Education and to the needs for democracy education in the Arab World as defined in this report.

Robert R. LaGamma  
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*Council for a Community of Democracies*

# Report of the Participants in the March 18–20, 2005 Pocantico Conference on Democracy Education in the Middle East and Muslim Africa

## Preface:

Citizens of North Africa and the Middle East have had little experience with democratic practice in recent decades. Further, the participation of peoples of that region in shaping their destinies and the decisions that affect their lives has lagged behind that of peoples in other regions of the world. This is so despite the energetic work of very many civil society organizations in countries throughout the region. The “freedom deficit” of the region, highlighted by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) reports, is clearly the product of many factors, both internal and external. The struggle for freedom and democracy has never ceased. Moreover, in recent years, people of the region have become more visibly engaged in a process of change.

Recently, a commentator on the Middle East wrote:

*What we have been seeing in the outbursts of democracy in the streets of Beirut, Baghdad, Cairo and even Riyadh is something real and authentic. It is driven both in response to particular events...and in response to a deep longing...for a different future, particularly among young people, who know what is going on elsewhere, and want their own piece of the freedom pie.*

This paper reflects the views of those representatives of civil society gathered at the March 18-20, 2005 Pocantico Conference on Democracy Education in the Middle East and Muslim Africa. It constitutes an appeal to the Community of Democracies and its governments gathered in Santiago, Chile, at the April 28-30, 2005 Ministerial Conference of the Community.

## Statement:

We the participants of the Pocantico Conference call on the member nations of the Community of Democracies collectively and separately to support the peaceful process of democracy building in the region. We urge them to support the efforts of organizations of civil society and the educational institutions in the region to promote an understanding of democracy and the dissemination of democratic ideas and especially human rights to enable the citizens of those countries to participate in the decision-making processes that shape their lives and

their future. We note that democracy education has been recognized by the Community of Democracies, since its founding Warsaw Conference in June 2000, as a building block fundamental to the fostering, strengthening and consolidation of democracy throughout the world. Further, the promotion of democracy education is central to the fulfillment of the goals of the Warsaw Declaration and the Seoul Plan of Action.

We call upon the Community of Democracies to work with donor countries, foundations and multilateral institutions to develop mechanisms in the region that would make it possible for those institutions to contribute resources and ideas as the highest priority.

## Recommendations:

- 1) Encourage the spread of democratic ideas including human rights by targeting young people whose attitudes are in a state of formation.
- 2) Conduct research on how best to effectively educate all citizens about democratic values and institutions appropriate to the culture and traditions of each country in the region, cognizant that while democracy has core universal values it takes many forms shaped by each individual society.
- 3) Focus especially on research on the compatibility of Islam and democracy.
- 4) Encourage teachers, school systems, media representatives, and civil society organizations to support

and conduct long term democracy education programs.

- 5) Engage Muslim religious leaders and Imams in democracy education programs in their countries, in the same way as Christian religious leaders are involved in Eastern and Central Europe, and Latin America.
- 6) Focus on exposing adults, particularly parents, to democratic ideas and values in order to reach young people.
- 7) Assure that lessons learned in introducing innovative democracy education programs in the transitional societies of Asia, Europe, Africa and the Americas are offered to the Middle East and North Africa.
- 8) Seek support from the Community of Democracies to make democracy education for the region a priority for the proposed International Centre for Democratic Transition, in collaboration with other centers in this region.
- 9) Study and draw on the experiences and expertise of democratic Muslim countries in other parts of the world in the field of democracy education for possible adaptation in the region.
- 10) Work with civil society, to develop curricula to promote citizenship and respect for the rights of women, minorities, and freedom of religion.
- 11) Develop materials, as part of those curricula, for introduction into the educational system that would help to advance the rights of women in accordance with international human rights treaties and conventions.
- 12) Prepare materials in cooperation with the proposed International Centre for Democratic Transition for use in the educational system that would highlight democratic transitions in other regions of the world.
- 13) Develop and publish textbooks, working with indigenous publishers and organizations of civil society in partnership with educational institutions in each country, to promote democratic values and citizen participation for use in schools. Assist local scholars with the publication of materials on democracy consistent with their own traditions.
- 14) Examine and seek to replace textbooks that convey intolerance, discrimination and anti-democratic ideas.
- 15) Translate and adapt to local circumstances relevant materials on democracy and human rights from other languages, as well as republishing and disseminating materials already developed, in order to enhance the flow of ideas to overcome the "knowledge deficit" of the Arab World

identified by UNDP. As part of this effort encourage development of indigenous publishers.

- 16) Develop exchange programs that would permit educators in the region to work with those in democratic societies who have developed materials on civic education for their school systems.
- 17) Promote the exploration and use of participatory pedagogies that would transform and democratize the classroom.
- 18) Establish formal programs with the help of UN agencies and the World Bank as well as regional organizations to ensure that democracy education is integrated into the educational system of each country.
- 19) Promote the establishment and expansion of networks of educators and activists, including existing networks, devoted to democracy education in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

## **Appeal to the Ministers of the Community of Democracies**

We the undersigned urge the Ministers of the Community of Democracies to sustain their commitment to advancing democracy education as fundamental to the worldwide democracy movement and the ideals for which it stands by supporting the recommendations contained in this appeal.

Further, we call upon the governments of the Middle East and Muslim Africa to be supportive of a dialogue on democracy and human rights education initiatives and ask that they form partnerships with donor countries and organizations of civil society to facilitate the teaching of democracy in their countries. We also call upon the governments of the community of democracies and international donors to use their leverage with the governments of the Middle East and Muslim Africa to implement these recommendations and make the extension of aid, trade, and technology to these governments contingent upon respecting the letter and spirit of this document.

We, the participants of the Pocantico March 18-20, 2005 conference, commit ourselves to work together toward achieving the objectives stated above and to assist all parties working toward these ends. We call upon the Council for a Community of Democracies to establish a democracy education network organization to advance that goal.

## List of Participants in the Conference and Signatories of the Report

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# Reports of the Four Pocantico Working Groups

## Working Group I:

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### *Islam, Democracy and Citizenship*

#### *The Problem:*

There is no fundamental contradiction between Islam, Islamic cultures, and the basic ideas of human rights and democracy. Moderate Islamic and secular thinkers must come together and agree on a general platform, and clarify the role of religion in politics, and the position of women and minority rights.

Moderate Islamic parties must be allowed to participate in the political process because this allows them to develop and become more practical and pragmatic. We should encourage more debates, conferences and workshops among scholars (religious and non-religious) to encourage Ijtihad, and the development of a modern, moderate, and appropriate interpretation of Islam for Muslims in the 21st century.

Democracy is mostly about individual rights, including the right to choose and practice one's faith. The state should never impose or interfere with religion or religious practice. Religion is a matter of personal choice, and the governments have an obligation to respect and protect religious freedoms. Religious or ethnic minorities must be treated as full citizens and participants in the political system. Religious scholars are also citizens and do not have a right to monopolize religion or to veto the opinion of the majority.

Citizens have certain intrinsic rights, and governments must respect and protect these rights. Muslim scholars must come up with new interpretations of Islam that emphasize the ideas of democracy, human rights, the rights of women and minorities, and recognize the principle of equality and citizenship.

#### **Recommendations:**

1. Donors and international organizations should not exclude non-violent Islamists (and non-secular) groups from the political process and from donor activities.
2. Governments must allow freedom of expression and freedom of association for all groups (secular and non-secular) in order to encourage debate and a healthy political process based on the respect for human rights and democratic principles.
3. Governments must respect human rights and democratic rules. Governments that abuse human rights or are not elected democratically should face suspension from international organizations.
4. Governments and political groups should stop using religious and cultural specificity as a pretext to abuse human rights and deny democracy.
5. Activists in the region assisted by donors should convene an international conference on developing a modern interpretation of Islam (through Ijtihad) involving Muslim scholars (both jurists and non-jurists).
6. Governments must take legal and practical measures to ensure that the rights of women and minorities are protected in accordance with international human rights treaties.

## Working Group II:

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### *The Media and Education for Democracy*

#### *The Problem:*

Freedom of expression is essential to any democratic society. To the extent that media are free, citizens can be educated about democracy. Any democracy requires both freedom of expression, and also access to information by all citizens, regardless of gender or ethnic background. Governments must be transparent about how laws and official decisions are made, and to offer access to such information as census data and state statistics.

#### **Recommendations:**

- 1) Lift restrictions — legal and otherwise — on free media.
- 2) Establish freedom of access to information.
- 3) Encourage development of independent media by:
  - a) Training journalists
  - b) Developing appropriate technology
  - c) Permitting and encouraging partnerships with media of other countries
- 4) Establish independent organizations to permit assignment of airwaves to private broadcasters, but not to regulate content.
- 5) Lift censorship on publications.
- 6) Allow and encourage unrestricted use of Internet, satellite broadcast, and cyber cafés.
- 7) Allow media to establish their own ethical and professional standards.
- 8) Establish reasonable time limits on release of public records, on request by private citizens.

## Working Group III:

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### *NGO & Donors for Democracy Education*

#### *The Problem:*

Most nongovernmental organizations involved in citizenship or democracy education are working in an overly competitive manner or in isolation of each other. What is needed is greater synergy and networking. Among the problems effective networking would help overcome are:

The management problems many NGOs are faced with;

The fact that many NGOs have tended to be competitive rather than collaborative;

That many act independently rather than cooperatively;

And the problem that governments fail to work in collaboration with NGOs.

#### **Recommendations:**

##### **NGOs**

- 1) There is a need to establish a democracy education network organization. One of the purposes of such a network would be to regularly organize workshops on democracy education in the Middle East.
- 2) NGOs are encouraged to include democracy education into their mission goals and objectives.

##### **Donors**

- 1) Appeal to donors to share information in order to avoid funding the same projects.
- 2) Urge donors to have funding criteria to avoid arbitrary decision making.
- 3) Give priority to democracy education in the Islamic region.

##### **Fundraising**

- 1) We recommend that funding be based upon conditionality in accordance with Community of Democracies criteria and encourage the implementation of gender sensitive issues.

- 2) A donor conference should be organized on the development of democracy education in the Islamic world with the participation of UN Agencies, the EU, Council of Europe, USAID and related agencies. To do so, we encourage the establishment of a Follow-up Committee involving the International Centre for Democratic Transition.
- 3) NGOs should be independent and donors should not “dictate” activities of NGOs.

## **Working Group IV:**

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### *Democracy Education in Formal and Informal Education*

#### *The Problem:*

Formal educational systems should seek to endow men and women with the necessary tools for acquiring, processing and applying information. Emphasis should be placed on those basic communication, analytical and critical skills that empower individuals to find jobs anywhere in the globally competitive economy characteristic of this knowledge-based age, to fulfill their potential as human beings, to confidently take initiatives and to assume responsibility for their actions. Educational systems should seek to foster the ability to work collectively, as well as to develop responsible citizens who contribute to democratic life based on the rule of law and a respect for human rights. People and entities outside the formal educational system should be provided with the opportunity to acquire the same training and skills through informal means as those inside.

## **Recommendations:**

### **Formal Education**

In the area of formal (academic) education, the following problems were identified:

- 1) Much too much emphasis is placed on learning by rote and on memorization.
- 2) Much greater emphasis should be placed on analysis and critical thinking.
- 3) A comprehensive review of curricula, teaching and delivery methodology is highly desirable.
- 4) Material and logistical assistance to school and university systems is urgently needed to improve the quality of education.
- 5) Equal access to education for women and minorities is essential.

### **Informal Education**

In the area of informal education and training, the following initiatives are recommended:

- 1) Promotion of workshops and training focusing on civil society and democratic procedures as well as human rights education, with special attention to the cultural and social context of the region.
- 2) The fostering of educational exchange programs between the Arab and Islamic world and the West.

# Council for a Community of Democracies

The Mission of the Council for a Community of Democracies is to strengthen the web of intergovernmental ties that bind the world's democracies together and to foster new democracies and strengthen existing ones.

CCD serves that mission by working with like-minded individuals and NGOs throughout the world. CCD also works in concert with governments, when it serves the common purpose, and proposes to governments innovative alternatives to traditional policies. In short, CCD by initiating and facilitating action on new ideas to strengthen democracy, worldwide, serves as a catalyst for cooperation among democracies and democratic change within nations. CCD does so by supporting the Community of Democracies movement, by working to strengthen the United Nations system through the creation of a vigorous UN Democracy Caucus, by building an International Centre for Democratic Transition and by advancing democracy education around the globe.

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