

**Address of
HRH Princess Basma bint Talal
at the Plenary Panel
“Islamic Culture and Democratic Tradition”
Istanbul
13 April 2004**

**Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I would like to thank Her Excellency Mrs. Madeleine Albright, Chairman of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Turkish Democracy Foundation for inviting me to participate in this important event.

Our gathering here today to discuss the dialectic between Islam and democracy is obviously timely. We are all too aware of the ways in which a great religion, although rightfully in itself a force for positive change, has been distorted and manipulated from within and without. I very much see the value of gathering such as ours, and the relevance of the themes with which we are engaging. The purpose of our current session was ‘to initiate a clear declaration that democracy and Islam are indeed compatible’ and I look forward to the discussions that we shall have on this topic.

It is firstly important to recognize the convergence among the core values in democratic Western societies and Middle Eastern-Islamic societies that honour the ideals of justice, opportunity, human dignity and the rule of

law. These shared values aim at common ends, but they are expressed and implemented in very different ways, such as shura (consultation), ijmaa (consensus), elected parliaments, or independent judiciaries. Scholars have amply identified these issues, so I will not elaborate on this point. I would only stress that ‘Islam and democracy’ seem very much to converge when we disaggregate and identify their foundational values and operative principles, such as the accountability of those in power, consultation, representation, the right to redress of grievance, the due process of law, fair adjudication of disputes, constitutionalism, the consent of the governed, majority rule with protection for minority rights, and other such aspects.

I make this point because the issue of Islam and democracy these days is often defined by a troubling dichotomy. On the one hand, recent years have seen literally thousands of conferences, studies, papers, and discussions on this issue. Yet on the other hand, the terms of reference for ‘Islam and democracy’ often reflect two largely negative and reactionary trends since the early 1990s; most importantly democracy is suspect or denied in Islamic societies because it might lead Islamist parties to power, for example through free parliamentary elections. Since Sept. 11, democracy is often primarily seen as a remedy for ailing Islamic societies in order to prevent future terrorism against the West. The recipe for such democracy entails sweeping political reforms, which are mostly conceived from a western perspective, that may not always coincide with Islamic societies’ own views.

While these perspectives include elements of truth, they also reflect many more distortions and inequities, which gatherings such as this congress help to redress. We must make the point over and over that we neither

promote what is termed as democracy primarily as a tool to prevent terror, nor do we inhibit democratic impulses in order to prevent Islamist groups from sharing or wielding power. These criteria, however appealing they may be to some, are too narrow for most. Democracy is not something that we deny or promote according to short-term utilitarian measures. It is a right that all people should enjoy in the manner and time that they deem most appropriate for themselves.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines democracy as ‘Government by the people; a form of government in which the power resides in the people and is exercised by them either directly or by means of elected representatives; a form of society which favours equal rights, the ignoring of hereditary class distinctions, and tolerance of minority views.’ If we agree with this definition, then many of us who are Muslims, or have an understanding and appreciation of Islam, would find that democracy in this sense is a both necessary feature and outcome of an applied Islamic world view. In this sense, I am hesitant to dwell too much on attempting to illustrate that democracy and Islam are compatible. While I understand that some might need the reassurance that this is the case, to many others, this is obvious.

Sadly, events and people around the world today have meant that all too often, we engage in disclaimers and apologies about our faith. I feel certain however, that this distinguished audience is keenly aware of the core values of justice, tolerance and equality in which our faith is grounded, as well as the participatory political functioning that is essential within the Islamic Umma. I believe that what we should engage instead in is a

discussion of what is commonly held to be democracy today in a global context, and how we can ensure that it fits the criteria for true participation, equality and justice as it is meant to entail.

The point that I wish to put to you today is that a truly democratic world, where all peoples are allowed to enjoy their rights, to live in peace, with dignity, is one where all the great religions of the world could thrive. In the absence of such a democratic world however, it is more likely that religions such as ours will be misused and distorted. In this sense, it is our duty and our right, to reclaim both our religion, and indeed our shared notion of democracy.

A perfectly legitimate discussion about conditions and trends in Islamic societies must begin by understanding the key issues and forces at play there. In the Arab world at least, the relevant forces include a complex combination of religion, identity, governance, statehood, nationalism, ethnicity, tribalism, Arabism, environmental conditions, economic disparities, and historical memory – to mention only the most obvious. If our societies are stable or violent, peaceful or otherwise, democratic or autocratic, or dynamic or stagnant, it is because of how these factors influence people's attitudes and actions towards public policy and politics. Reducing such complexities to the simplicity of Islam and democracy, Islam vs. democracy, or Islam in the absence of democracy, is neither accurate nor useful.

Like all religions, Islam is a rich and noble value system that expresses our belief in the divine and provides meaning, comfort and hope to the lives of ordinary people. Yet also like all religions, it can be mobilized for political ends, and as such it can be a force for liberty or for tyranny. If religion does not serve their goals, those who exploit religion politically will find other tools to use, including ethnicity, ideology, nationalism, and economic resentment. Religion in general and Islam in particular, are not the main issue, and should not be used as defining criteria in studying or assessing entire societies.

Democracy itself – however worthy – should not be used as either a measuring stick or a conditionality for the West to engage Islamic societies. Rather than juxtaposing Islamic and democratic societies, we should engage in a far more productive enterprise. We should explore our shared goals; define them in terms of public values and systems of good governance, and work to achieve them in the real cultural and historical contexts of our respective societies. This means we must acknowledge differences as well as commonalities. Most crucially, it also means that we must each engage in a process of critical reflection about the kind of world we are creating through our political, social and economic practises. It is worrying to many that democracy has become synonymous with the working of a dominant world order, and those most powerful within it. The terms dictated by this dominant world order are not always equitable, just or even sustainable. The stark contrast between the have and have nots of our world, between the north and the south, continue to challenge any notions that global democracy is capable of becoming a reality in our world today.

In the aftermath of September 11th, and in the course of the war against terror, we have also become very aware of how democracy can be used to camouflage a host of political agendas. The type of reform that is being called for around the world is not necessarily the type that will embrace difference, encourage voice, and insure participation. This kind of ‘one size fits all’ democracy is at once monolithic and restrictive. Such a democracy is also oxymoronic and paradoxical.

For many of us in the Middle East region who are engaged in reform processes, it is imperative to bear this in mind. We must be able to speak honestly with our friends on all sides. While understanding their position, we must also be vigilant in insuring that all factions of our societies have a right to participate in dictating the course of their future. Change that is top down will not be lasting. Not all our conversations will be comfortable ones, but should the spirit of cooperation prevail, they can be productive.

Recently, I have observed the number of events that seek to create dialogue, between faiths and peoples. Sadly, these events and initiatives fall short of their desired outcomes. This is mainly because true dialogue is never reached. Generally, it is the ‘acceptable face of the Islamic world’ that is requested to participate; one that will not challenge, contradict or question. The polarisation that is occurring in our world is troubling. The Arab and the Islamic world is often seen to comprise of two camps; one termed ‘jihadist’, the other ‘reformist’ or democratic. This oversimplification is troubling to the extreme. There is profound need to engage with a spectrum of elements and voices emanating from the Arab and Islamic world, internally and externally.

Believers in democracy everywhere seek the universal values of good governance, dignity of the individual, a sense of justice for all, well-being of the community, security of the nation, and peace with one's neighbours. This country, Turkey, is one of the most impressive examples of how democratic governance develops steadily and convincingly in an Islamic culture when it is given the opportunity to do so. Turkey's progress has not always been smooth or steady, yet the democratization process has persisted since independence. Today Turkey is a model of a satisfying balance between the Turkish people's Islamic identity and their democratic values. The incumbent government's most recent good showing in the municipal elections is the latest confirmation of this point.

Our own experience in Jordan is similarly instructive, especially for two reasons: the interaction among a variety of indigenous identities, and the symbiotic relationship between monarchy and democracy. In over eight decades of Hashemite rule marked by steady human development and a war-prone regional environment, the country has experienced alternating periods of lively parliamentary democracy and unfettered executive rule. Democratic governance systems continue to evolve at both national and local levels, with periods of heightened efficacy and others of lower credibility.

The results of this process over eight decades have been mixed. The positive aspects have included continuous strengthening of the judiciary and the rule of law, a firm focus on constitutionalism, expanding civil society institutions working for rights-based issues, greater personal rights and freedoms, a more robust press, and more dynamic government

accountability through parliament or informal civil society mechanisms. The weaknesses have derived from the limited impact of parliament and political parties, the lack of effective ideological parties in favour of tribal or regional representation, our vulnerability to external influences, the low participation rate of women in public life, and insufficient private sector or independent research institutions and think tanks that can impact on public policy discussions.

Many of Jordan's advances have been promoted top down by the monarchy and the state, while others have been pushed from below by popular action. The government's traditional dominance of the economy, for example, has tended to maintain much power in the hands of the executive branch. But this is changing, as globalization, deregulation, and privatization devolve economic power to the private sector and the regions of the country. This in turn may promote greater democratic participation and local accountability in governance. It opens space for people who were marginalized to participate in politics, including women, youth, and special interest groups. Having said this, it is important that civil society and the NGO sector in particular, makes efforts to insure that change opens up opportunities for all in society. The rights of the poor, women, and other marginalised groups often have to be secure and protected, so that they may benefit from changes around them, and not be overwhelmed by them instead. In Jordan, we are realising that focusing on the 'supply' side of governance, through governmental and political reform is not enough. Civil society has an invaluable role to play in stimulating the demand side of governance, by strengthening a dynamic and vocal citizenship.

A citizenship which is aware of its rights and responsibilities can claim its entitlements and act as a partner to government in the development process. Such a robust relationship between people and government is a crucial part of the democratic process, but it is very much in line with the dynamics that govern relationships between people and leaders in the Islamic umma, where rights as well as responsibilities are both critical, for people as well as their rulers.

In Jordan, traditional Islamic charities and voluntary societies are active in providing services at the community level. They form an important part of the civil society family, and enjoy a great degree of credibility within the communities they serve. In a region where civil society and NGOs in particular are relatively new, there is much to be learned from how these small community based organisations operate, mobilize, and gain popular support and volunteerism. Unfortunately, world events have also made the efforts of these organisations open to scrutiny and suspicion, because of their religious foundations. This is often both unfair and unwarranted. Often, working with those ‘traditionalist’ organisations can be the best way to achieve results at the community level, because they are accepted. Community leaders and opinion makers within such organisations can play a crucial role in swaying popular opinion. We have had good examples of this in relation to the role of women for example, who have also been active in community initiatives through such organisations.

Slow, steady, but sustained democratization can succeed, if it is bolstered by activist leadership, consistently articulated goals, a credible judiciary, access to politics by all groups in society, gender-equal education,

human development investments and gains, and expanding opportunities for the individual citizen. The key to credible decision-making, nationally and locally, it seems, is in ensuring that a consultative process allows all citizen to express their views and to hold decision-makers accountable. How such participation and accountability take place – whether in public or in more traditional private gatherings, or even by royal prerogative – reflects social norms, derived mainly from national, religious, cultural, and tribal values. But the fact that they take place – that abusive power is checked, and ineffective decision-makers are changed – reflects the country’s application of democratic norms in a manner that is credible to its people. Where these two paths intersect, we have what might be termed an evolving Jordanian-Arab-Islamic democracy, which some analysts have aptly called a “constitutional tribal monarchy in democratic transition”. Indeed, all four of these elements play crucial roles in Jordan’s political culture – the constitution and rule of law, tribal, religious, and Arab values, the role of the monarchy, and democratic governance systems.

Jordan’s governance system has accommodated a rich array of political and social views, expressed by Islamists, leftists, Arab nationalists, Jordanian nationalists, socialists, free marketers, Baathists, Communists, human rights activists, women’s rights advocates, and many others. Because parliament as a whole tends to reflect social norms, a strong centrist core of MPs has dominated the elected lower house during the last four elections, largely reflecting their tribal identities and community leadership responsibilities. This is an important indicator of how a modern democratic system remains defined by the stronger, older social norms of our society.

Jordan's experience and many others indicate that Islam is an important source of the moral values upon which democratic governance systems are built – but religion is only one of several key factors by which we hold one another accountable for public policy decisions. Traditional Islamic and Arab values must combine with modern democratic governance, enlightened leadership, and constant concern for the dignity of the ordinary citizen, if we wish to enjoy stability and progress.

In seeking to promote justice and democracy in our world today, we must be aware of the limitations of our current definitions and terms of reference, as characterised largely by a dominant western discourse. In a world where we must coexist, it is imperative that we also aim to seek other discourses and frameworks to guide us. The responsibility of reform lies in all our hands, and often, in our own back yards. Promoting democratic values requires the ability to listen, to reconsider, and to tolerate. A value-based world order which recognises difference is not only possible, but desperately needed in our world. In order for a global future to be possible, we must also be able to envision a world that is very different to what it is today. At present, no single dominant world order is capable of envisioning and realising such a new world. The very terms and tools that it has available are themselves complicit in the problems we are experiencing today.

As humanity, we do however have much to gain by forging a vision of true global democracy by incorporating those elements of our faiths, values and shared humanity which can enrich our global coexistence. Already, there are encouraging signs in what Naom Chomsky terms as 'the emerging

global bonds of sympathy and solidarity' that cut across lines of ethnicity, nationhood, race and religion. It is our hope that these will contribute to the making of a safer, more compassionate and thoughtful world than today's. For Chomsky, 'the future of our endangered species may be determined in no small measure by how these popular forces evolve.'

The Islamic world has a wealth of ideological, moral and historical experience to draw upon, with which to be a positive part of this process of thinking towards our Global future. Through its own value system, and its ability to appreciate difference, and the fact that so many Muslims have themselves experienced intolerance and suffered injustice, Islam can contribute much. It is our tasks, not only as Muslims, but as humans everywhere, to insure that all our societies contribute to a world order that truly aspires to espouse democracy as a cornerstone.

Thank you.