

# Democracy Equals Civil War: A Middle Eastern Paradox?

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## **Presenter**

Joost Hiltermann is the International Crisis Group Deputy Program Director, Middle East and North Africa Istanbul, Turkey. He manages a team of analysts based in Amman and Beirut conducting research in the countries of the Middle East and writing policy-focused reports on the factors that increase the risk of and drive armed conflict. The crisis in Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are the Crisis Group's two priorities in the region, but they also conduct research in Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. Dr. Hiltermann is a frequent contributor with major media outlets, including BBC, CNN, NPR, the *New York Times*, *Financial Times* and the *Christian Science Monitor*. He is also the author of *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq and the Gassing of Halabja* (Cambridge University Press 2007). This book re-examines Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons against Iranian soldiers and Iraqi Kurds during the Iran-Iraq war. It uncovers how Western powers, including the Reagan administration, aided and abetted Saddam and why these policies are now coming back to haunt the West.

## **Theme**

Dr. Hiltermann's presentation focused on the likelihood of successful democratic transitions in the Middle East. In the last few years, several states have had democratic elections, however, few strong consolidated democratic states have emerged. Dr. Hiltermann analyzed the reasons for why states in the Middle East, seems to fail in building democratic states. By looking specifically at Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq, he argued that it is difficult to find a common cause and that analysts needs to carefully understand each case and seek one unified explanation for the failure. He further argued that there is a need to build solid state institutions before states hold elections, only then, are elections likely to help consolidate democracy.

## **Audience**

The audience consisted of approximately 40 people. Audience members came from multiple academic units across campus including Interdisciplinary PhD program in Near and Middle Eastern Studies, Political Science, the Jackson School and the Evans School. Faculty, graduate students and undergraduate students were all represented.

### **Questions**

Questions from the discussant, Matt Goldman, a PhD student in Interdisciplinary PhD program in Near and Middle Eastern Studies program, as well as from the audience revolved around several themes. One key question was whether nation-states are possible in the Middle East, or if the states are to fragmented for viable nation-states to develop. Regarding Dr. Hiltermann's call for state building before elections, a member of the audience asked whether this is a dilemma that is possible to overcome. Another audience member was wondering what institutions matter? If the call is to build institutions before elections, then what institutions are most important? Finally, audience members had questions regarding the current situation between the Kurds in Northern Iraq and Turkey.

### **Implications for National Security**

Building democracy abroad is difficult and no one way exists. If the United States and/or other actors in the international system seek to do so, they need to pay careful attention to the local dynamics in each case. The U.S. should seek broad based international support in any future attempts to build democracy and unilateral action is unlikely to be successful.