



**Women's Foreign Policy Group
Author Series Event
Washington, DC
May 13, 2008**

Robin Wright

Diplomatic Correspondent, *The Washington Post*

Dreams and Shadows: The Future of the Middle East

Ms. Miriam Teresa Možgan: I would like to welcome you here to the new Embassy of Slovenia. Many of you have asked me when we moved here. I just wanted to tell you this story of this house very quickly. This used to be a former Yugoslav Embassy building. And we got it back after the succession process in 2001, and we've been renovating it. When Yugoslavia broke apart, each of the republics had to decide what to do with the former buildings, and we luckily got this building. It was not in such a nice state, and we've been renovating it and we moved here last summer. We are hosting numerous meetings here and we've had several exhibitions, and if you would leave your card we'll invite you to some of our events next time.

I'm happy that we are having this gorgeous day today. We are celebrating the end of the rainy season. It's quite unusual for Washington to have so many days of rain. It's great that we are all gathered here in this month of May. We've seen some historic events in this early month of May in the history of the European Union, the history of Slovenia, and also in the Middle East, to which we are going to dedicate some time later on. Let me go to the European Union: we just celebrated Europe Day, the birthday of the European Union, on May 9. At that time, the then French foreign minister, Robert Schuman, in 1950, presented the proposal for European integration.

I think the authors of the European project would have been quite surprised to learn that Slovenia would be chairing the European Union in 2008. Slovenia was, in 1950, still a very mediocre republic in the then Yugoslavia. But this has shown the trend of the transformative power of the EU; the EU has succeeded in showing its transformative power, and it's a work in progress still. Slovenia broke away from Yugoslavia in 1991 and is now chairing the European Union. A nation of 2 million is setting the agenda for 500 million people, and we are looking forward to handing the baton to the French in July, because it's quite a challenging thing, but it's a very exciting time as well. I don't know how many of you have been to Slovenia, but you are more than welcome to come. It's a country that, we often brag, is very close to Venice. It's only 2 hours from Venice, from our border, and 3 hours to Salzburg and Vienna, and very close to the Dalmatian Coast. Our country is one of the few countries that has the name "love" in its name.

The European Union is getting more and more involved in the Middle East as well, and I mentioned some historic moments that happened at this time. Slovenia just celebrated its fourth anniversary of joining the EU on the 1st of May. In May, Israel is also celebrating its 60th anniversary, and I'll stop here. I'll give the floor to the President of this formidable group. We are very happy to have you here and hope to have you here more often.

Patricia Ellis: Thank you so much, and thank you for your warm hospitality and for opening up the beautiful, new Chancery to the Women's Foreign Policy Group. We're really excited about being here. We couldn't have a better speaker, a better group, and certainly better weather. So we are extremely happy to be here. The program this evening with Robin Wright, Diplomatic Correspondent for *The Washington Post* is part of our Author Series. It's a very popular series. We've had many journalists, including Karen DeYoung, Andrea Mitchell, Barbara Slavin, and Martha Raddatz. We have two Author Series events this June, one with Laura Donohue who wrote a book on counterterrorism, and the other with Helena Cobban, a long-time contributor to *The Christian Science Monitor* and other media, who has a new book on re-engaging after Bush.

Good evening and welcome to everybody. We have lots of members, new members, and a lot of friends here tonight. For those of you who don't know me, I'm Patricia Ellis, President of the Women's Foreign Policy Group. We promote global engagement and women's leadership and voices on pressing international issues of the day. Certainly the Middle East is always timely, no matter when we could have scheduled this event, there's always something going on. Right now President Bush is having some big meetings in the Middle East, and Secretary Rice was just quoted as saying that the chances of getting something resolved are improbable, but not impossible. We'll hear a lot more about that from Robin too; she's a real expert on this.

Before I introduce Robin, who is the author of *Dreams and Shadows: The Future of the Middle East* – one of her many books, and I encourage you all to buy it, it is a must-read on the Middle East – I just wanted to mention that we do have a lot of diplomats here this evening, and one of the other very popular series we do is the Embassy Series, where we have hosted women foreign ministers and women ambassadors. Most recently we held an event at the Embassy of Oman. The Ambassador of Iceland is here with us tonight, welcome. He and his wife hosted a wonderful event with the Foreign Minister of Iceland at his residence, and we loved working with him and with other embassies. Could I just ask all of the diplomats to stand up? Thank you. We hope to have you back again and to work with you in the future. I also just wanted to recognize our Board members here: Gail Kitch, Donna Constantinople, and Theresa Loar. Thank you all for coming. And I would also like to thank the staff of the Embassy and my staff for making this possible.

Now it is my great pleasure to introduce Robin Wright, someone I've known for many years, and who is certainly well known in Washington and around the world for her outstanding coverage of foreign policy and for her reporting, which has earned so many

different awards. She has such an impressive career. I will not list everything, but I'm just going to give you a few highlights. She currently is covering foreign policy for *The Washington Post*, but she's reported from more than 100 countries. She's covered the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Prior to working for *The Washington Post*, she worked for the *L.A. Times*, *The Sunday Times of London*, CBS News, she's written for *The New Yorker*, *Foreign Policy*, *Foreign Affairs*, I'm not going to list them all. She's very well known for her coverage particularly of Iran. She has won so many different awards, and I do want to just mention a few of them: the UN Correspondents Gold Medal, the National Magazine Award for reportage from Iran in *The New Yorker*. She received the Overseas Press Club Award for "best reporting in any medium requiring exceptional courage and initiative" for coverage of African wars, and the Weintal Prize for diplomatic reporting. She has also been the recipient of a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation grant.

She's been a fellow at many of the think tanks around Washington, including Carnegie, Brookings, and also at universities such as Yale, Duke, and Stanford, while she was writing her various books. I know even if a lot of you haven't met her, you would recognize her because she's frequently on television, whether it's PBS, the networks, *Meet the Press*, *Face the Nation*, my old program the *NewsHour*, etc. Lastly, in her spare time, she has written several books, and I just wanted to mention them: *The Last Great Revolution: Turmoil and Transformation in Iran*; *Sacred Rage: The Wrath of Militant Islam*; *Flashpoints: Promise and Peril in a New World*; and *In the Name of God: The Khomeini Decade*. Please join me in welcoming Robin Wright.

Robin Wright: Thank you very much, I'm delighted to be here. This is my fifth book, and I think my favorite. I don't have children; I call these all my babies, and I've done them all in nine months, so they qualify. This one I wrote in part because of America's extraordinary failure in Iraq. Because we didn't know what was happening inside the country before we went in. We relied on a group of exiles to give us guidance, the leader of whom had not been in Iraq since 1958, when he left as a teenager, not with a body of experience on politics. And I wanted to make sure that the United States didn't do this again. We so often look at the countries of the region in terms of their strategic interest. We look at Syria because of the Arab-Israeli peace process, because of its meddling in Iraq, because of its meddling in Lebanon. But we often don't look at what's happening inside the country. So I decided to go back and take a look at all 22 Muslim countries, as well as Israel, to get a sense of what's happening, and to write a book that takes a look at the internal dynamics in a way that we in the United States often don't do.

Now, I have to tell you that I've been covering the Middle East now since October 6, 1973. I landed there on the day the fourth Middle East war broke out, and it became a pattern of my life to the point that every time I landed someplace, there was a war, a coup d'etat, a revolution, whatever, to the point that my father said to me that he wouldn't dare go to Bermuda on vacation, because he was sure there would be some kind of violent uprising. When I landed in the Middle East, the price of oil was \$3.12 a barrel. So I have witnessed a lot of change on a lot of fronts. I lived in Beirut for five years, during which I witnessed the very first suicide bombing against an American target, the American

Embassy.

I remember standing in front of what had been a seven story building, overlooking the Mediterranean, as rescuers picked through tons of mangled concrete and steel, looking for little bits of bodies to put in small plastic bags so that they could later be matched up together and the bodies buried together. Many of those people had been my friends, so I felt very personally the emergence of what I have dubbed the “sacred rage” – the extremism that has redefined our foreign policy and redefined the world’s political spectrum over the last 25 years. And I followed that trend, writing about it in one of my very first books, and tracking it: I went to Iran to look at the extremism responsible, and went to Afghanistan during the Taliban years to get a sense of that new dynamic.

When I went back to the region for this book, I was really struck by how something different has begun to happen. Now I have a very old friend here, we worked together on the *Christian Science Monitor* back in the early ’70s, and she will vouch for the fact that I am the ultimate pessimist. I am not the one who says, “Is the glass half full?” or “Is the glass half empty?” I’m the one who says, “Is there really any water in the glass at all?” So when I come away sensing that there is some positive movement, I surprise myself more than anyone else. And the thing that struck me in going from country to country was that there is a budding culture of change that has begun to emerge. It takes place in different ways among different groups; it’s a disjointed trend; it’s often at a local level, not even at a national one. It’s region-wide only in the sense that there are different pockets in many places.

And it has emerged among groups that are quite diverse: among rebel clerics in Tehran; among defiant judges in Cairo; among feminists in Morocco, and female candidates for office for the first time in Kuwait; among young techies in Jeddah, and brave businessmen in Damascus; and for all of them, the thing that is so striking is that peaceful empowerment is the preferred means of tackling the status quo and challenging even the extremists. I came to the conclusion that the issue in the Middle East today is not whether to engage in change, but the issue really is how to do it. And lots of people have lots of different ideas. One of the challenges before I went out to the region came from a colleague who said, the problem in the region is that there are no Lech Wałęsas; there are no Nelson Mandelas. And so I actually went out in search of, is there anybody out there? And again I came away tremendously inspired.

So often we see change better through the human experience, and so my book is really about the characters, the people who are doing different things in different ways in lots of different places. Pat asked me to talk for only about 20 minutes, so I thought I’d spend some of my time talking about some of the people I met. I tried very hard to see the full spectrum of activists. The book is called *Dreams and Shadows*, and I went not only to see the new activists, I went to see the leader of Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hassan Nasrallah. I went to Damascus and saw the head of Hamas, Khaled Mashaal. And they are going to ensure that we have many overcast days for years to come. But I thought I’d tell you about some of the new faces that have inspired me. One of my favorite characters is the Nelson Mandela of Syria. His name is Riad al-Turk, and he has been jailed over and over

and over for challenging the autocratic rule of the Assad family. The third time he was arrested, he was held in jail, the size of an elevator shaft; no windows, no furniture, no bed, no toilet. There were no charges against him.

There was no trial. He had no paper, no pencil, no books, no contact with the outside world. It was solitary confinement. He kept his sanity by taking the uncooked kernels of rice from his soup at night, and during the day using them to make geometric designs on the floor of his cell. And he did that for 18 years. He was 68 when he came out for the third time. And what did he do? He could have gone home and spent time with his family, getting to know his daughters and his grandchildren for the first time. But no, he decided that it was his moral obligation to continue to speak out against authoritarian rule. And what happened to him? He went back to jail. This time there was a trial, but only in the loosest sense of the word. I was very fortunate to be in Damascus a few weeks after he was freed. Now in his mid-70s, he has severe heart problems and is probably almost legally blind. And what was he doing? He was, after seeing me, going off to give an interview on Al Jazeera to complain about the Assad family.

There is an extraordinary array – he is not a lone figure in Damascus. There is a whole side of Syria that we just don't look at. And for my money, Syria is the most brittle regime in the Middle East. It has leveraged its meddling in Iraq and with Palestinians and in Lebanon to give it some kind of importance, when in fact it has very little of any value otherwise. There are a host of people in Damascus I found, doing lots of things: a human rights lawyer who was taking all these cases, including the one of Riad Turk, pro bono, to the point that he had to sell first his car and then his office, and then the belongings in his home. When I went to interview him, we sat on the only two chairs in the living room, because that's all he had left. And a few weeks after I saw him he was picked up, and he remains in jail to this day.

Some of the most striking people I met were women. I was really encouraged by the way that women on their own steam, no longer deferring to men, were defining change. One of my favorite characters is a woman named Fatima Mernissi, who is a Moroccan. She was born in a harem in Morocco – a harem not in the sense of literature and lore, where a man has many wives and concubines – this is the traditional harem of the Middle East, where the extended family, the grandparents, all the brothers and sisters, and the grandchildren all live in one large home. Every female in the family was illiterate. They were not allowed to listen to the radio. The women entertained each other by giving little plays that they would act out.

There was a man hired full time to sit at the front door to ensure that the women never left and that men never entered the home. The father locked up the radio when he left so the women couldn't listen to it. But Fatima was a very curious little girl. At the age of 7, she watched where her father hid the radio, and she went and opened the cabinet and turned on the radio, and learned about the outside world. She encouraged her mother, finally, to let her go to school, to talk to her father. And he held a family council, where all the men come together and make the decisions about a woman's life, and asked, could she go to school. She ended up being able to go to elementary school and junior high

school; they went through this every time she went through school, until she graduated from high school.

She ended up at the Sorbonne, and then did her graduate degree at Brandeis. Today she's writing a series of wonderful books about women's rights, and she's written a wonderful book, one of many, called *The Veil and the Male Elite*, which looks at all of the fatwas, all of the customs, within Islamic history that impose restrictions on women. And it's not just opinion; this is wrong or this is right, she looked at what the origin was, what the culture of the time was. Some of them were added centuries after the time of the faith's founding in the seventh century. It's a revolutionary book.

Another of my favorite characters is a woman named Ghada Shahbender, an Egyptian, who had never voted; she was a typical soccer mom. She had never engaged in any political party, like most Egyptians. And she had four children, teenagers, all of them athletic. She was in the middle of a divorce. She'd gone back to school to get a teaching certificate so that she'd have an independent income. But one day on television, she saw pictures – this is on one of the new satellite televisions in the Middle East that circumvents state-controlled media – and she saw pictures of a group of women protestors who were being beaten up by unofficially sanctioned thugs as a row of policemen just stood and watched. She was so outraged that she decided that she wanted to do something about it, and the next week she went out and joined the protest.

She tells the delicious story of how the woman next to her, noticing a new face, turned to her and said, Did you bring 100 Egyptian pounds with you? And – Ghada Shahbender is her name – Ghada turned to the woman and said, “Since when does entering a protest have an entry fee?” And the woman said to her, “Well, it's for bail, of course.” And she realized that she'd crossed a threshold. Well, she decided that being reactive was not enough; she wanted to be proactive. So, she formed a group, mobilizing her friends, called “We're Watching You”- and the “you,” of course, is the Egyptian government. They were trying to decide what they could do to hold the government to account; to let them know that there were groups out there that were engaged. And they decided that with presidential and parliamentary elections coming up, they would form their own monitoring group, because the Egyptian government doesn't allow independent international monitors.

Never having voted, never having engaged in party activities, they hadn't a clue what to do. So they went to lawyers to find out what constituted voter fraud. They went to the parties to find out what it was that they needed to watch for. They started a website, posting instructions: if you're interested in voting and helping us, this is what to watch for. They took ads out; they rented two cell phones to give numbers. They hadn't a clue whether this would make any difference, and the day of the presidential vote, they gathered in the small office of a friend who had an advertising agency, not sure they were going to get a single call. But by the end of the day, they had documented over a thousand detailed cases of election fraud.

Western embassies started calling them, because suddenly there was an independent

monitoring group to weigh in. The Western media started calling them because there was somebody to quote. International human rights groups started calling them. She is today invited to help monitor elections in other parts of the Middle East. She also, after the elections were over, organized a suit against the Egyptian government for violations as a signatory to the International Treaty on Corruption, for failing to abide by its commitments.

She started a group called “KiDemocracy” to help teach 13 and 14 year olds about democracy. They use their own funds – this is a very middle-class woman – and they have entered a nationwide contest: anybody 13 or 14 years old can write an essay about four constitutions. One had to be American, one Egyptian, and any two others in the world. And the 12 winners, they brought to the United States and they took them for one week to a school in Massachusetts where they worked out a partnership where the 13 and 14 year olds learned about the rule of law. And then the second week, they took them to Philadelphia, to see where America’s constitution was written and to see the Liberty Bell. And they brought them to Washington. All of this has happened in the last two and a half years, in a country like Egypt where nothing happens quickly.

I’ll tell you one other story, and it’s about a man. There is diversity within countries emerging, and sometimes even among unusual groups. One of my favorite characters is an Iranian cleric. His name is Hadi Khamenei. He has been challenging the system of government in Iran, which is a bizarre structure where all the political elected offices are mirrored by religious bodies, and at the top is a Supreme Leader, a kind of infallible political pope. Hadi argues that having a Supreme Leader is unconstitutional; that no one should be above the law in Iran, because the Supreme Leader can veto candidates, overturn judicial decisions, overturn legislation, and counter any decision by the president.

He’s given lectures across the country and in seminaries as a cleric, saying that this is not a system that is compatible with either Islam or democracy. He wrote editorials; he started his own newspaper; he ran for Parliament, and won. He ran then for the body that works with the Supreme Leader, and his credentials were rejected as not being Islamic enough, even though he was a cleric. He was often beaten up and a couple of times hospitalized by religious vigilantes who disagreed with him. What makes him so interesting, in challenging the idea of the Supreme Leader, is that his older brother is Iran’s Supreme Leader. So there is diversity not only within society, but actually even within families.

In looking at the future of the region, it’s clear to me that, over the next generation, we’re likely to see what I call the three different “crats” challenging each other: the democrats, the theocrats, and the autocrats. The democrats will have the least experience and the most limited resources. They will be pitted against the autocrats, who have their hands on the national treasury and on the national security forces, and who have no intention of sharing power, and the theocrats, who believe they have a mission from God and a flock of the faithful to tap into. It’s going to be an uneven battle from the start. The democrats and the activists will have all the odds against them. And yet I think that this is going to

be a very interesting and invigorating time in the region.

As I said, there are lots of shadows, and I'm happy to talk about those too, but we all know about the bad guys in the region and what they're capable of, and I really wanted to talk about the new forces that I think are going to be most interesting. I came away from the region with a sense that while it will continue to spur anxiety and drain our resources and frustrate us for years to come, the Middle East has crossed that threshold, and has begun the process of change that has happened elsewhere in the world over the last 30 years, with the demise of Communism in Eastern Europe, the end of apartheid and minority rule in Africa, and the collapse of military dictatorships in Latin America.

The people of the region are very aware of what is happening elsewhere in the world, and I think they very much want to be a part of it. And what struck me was that even as Iraq has discredited, in many ways, the idea of democracy for many, it's made them afraid of democracy because of the costs, the chaos, and the uncertainty, that there are still an extraordinary number of people who are willing to take on the system. And they're willing, in some cases, to put their lives on the line in order to challenge the status quo and bring about change. And now I'll open it up to your questions, which is the most fun for me.

Patricia Ellis: I'm going to lead off, and I'd like to talk about what's going on right now in terms of President Bush and Condoleezza Rice. I mentioned the quote, it's "improbable, but not impossible" that anything could happen before Bush leaves office. Given the situation on the ground and the players that are involved at this time, are there any prospects for anything happening?

Robin Wright: No. I think that's the overwhelming consensus among all of us who cover this administration is and who followed the peace process. And I've been following Secretaries of State since Henry Kissinger, so I go way back. I think the best thing we can hope for is that the Bush administration puts in place some kind of process that the next administration can inherit. I'm not even convinced it can do that. But it's clear to me that the administration does not have the energy, the commitment, or the ideas to bring this about. And I think that it's a real tragedy, and I think it's going to cost us long term.

Patricia Ellis: Could you put what has happened recently in Lebanon in perspective for us?

Robin Wright: I lived in Lebanon for five years, and I remember the days in the '80s when everything was expressed through the barrel of a gun, whether it was a traffic jam—you know, you got engaged in gridlock and you thought no car was ever going to get out of it. It made L.A.'s highways look like they were empty. And then someone would simply take their gun out the window, fire it into the air, and suddenly, everyone would find a way to get out. I went to see the movie *Reds*, Warren Beatty's legendary movie, in a Beirut cinema. Instead of applauding, three guys took out their guns and fired into the air, and what goes up in a room has to come down. The rest of us dove under our seats.

At weddings, the way to celebrate was to fire your gun into the air. The day Yasser Arafat pulled out of Beirut in 1982, the guns were all firing in the air in celebration – 19 people died, because again, what goes up has to come down. Everything was through violence.

The thing that actually encourages me is that since November, when Lebanon was supposed to hold a presidential election and has been unable to because of divisions, that we haven't seen, until the past week, the crumbling of the situation into violence. But even that has been short-lived, and at the end of the day, no one in Lebanon really wants to go back to the days of civil war. There has been an accommodation rather quickly. I don't think we're out of the woods in Lebanon, I don't think we will be until you really get the Syrians to withdraw. But what struck me in going back to the Middle East was the fact that after Rafik Hariri's assassination in 2005, one-quarter of Lebanon's entire population turned out on the streets of Beirut to protest against Syria's rule and to demand . . . (recorder malfunction – end of transcript).