characterized by a lack of awareness of the work done by progressive Muslims to reform their societies from within. Conversely, Western society is sometimes portrayed in a superficial and inaccurate fashion in the news media of some Muslim countries. These misperceptions have resulted in what some commentators have called a "clash of ignorance."

As well, development-related problems in the Arab World deserve particular attention. These include: the "freedom deficit;" the low level of women's empowerment; and the "knowledge gap"(including the small number of foreign language books translated into Arabic). Demographic issues are also crucially important, given that approximately one-third of the populations of Arab countries are aged between 15 and 29. These factors, combined with oppressive, authoritarian regimes, can create a recipe for social upheaval.[18]

Is Democracy a Viable Option for Muslim Societies?

Though the concept of democracy has undergone many changes over time, democracy can now be seen as a universal paradigm meaning 'government by the people.' This definition is reflective of worldwide demands for greater public participation in political processes. Key components of democracies include participation, information, and protection of minority rights. Considerable debate concerns whether democracy alone can solve conflicts, or whether peace and stability are the only

true antecedents for democracy. While some maintain that democracy is incompatible with Islam, others note that this comparison is irrelevant and unnecessary, since colonial and post-colonial experiences must taken into account when assessing the failure of democracy in many Muslim countries. As well, to assert that democracy is incompatible with Islam can be seen as ethnocentric.

In order to strengthen democratic forces in Muslim states, support for democratic movements must be nurtured from both within and from the outside. To increase support for democracy within Muslim states, a democracy "through Muslim lenses" must be permitted to develop from the grassroots. Hence, space needs to be created for dialogue within Muslim societies to discuss issues of plurality, justice and democracy. In doing so, the emergence of an internal critique could prove to be a useful vehicle for change in Muslim societies: "What one needs is a powerful internal critique, free of religious rhetoric, which will set the Muslim societies on the right course and free their people from the stranglehold of oppressive governments."[19]

Also, the imposition of Western-style democracy on Muslim societies could prove counterproductive. Democracy must develop in a manner compatible with the society. However, indigenous democracy requires education in order for people understand democratic institutions and effectively use their right of franchise. As a result, in foreign policy, further emphasis should be placed on state education programs that could be an

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18 Tareq Ismael, interview in online video for Thinkers' Retreat on Canada and the Muslim World (2002), available at the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development website (**www.cfp-pec.gc.ca**).

19 Mushirul Hasan, "Discussion Paper for Thinkers' Retreat: Clash of Civilizations? (2002): September 9-11 and its Aftermath," available online at: **www.ecommons.net/ccfpd-thinkers2002/main.phtml?section=ottawa&show=hasan**.