



# PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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The Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) and the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies (CCAS)

**“Exporting”, ‘Spreading’, or ‘Supporting’ Middle East Democracy”**  
241 ICC, Georgetown University, 37<sup>th</sup> and O St. NW, 20 October, 2008, 12pm

POMED and the CCAS hosted **James Traub**, contributing writer at the *New York Times Magazine*; and **Michele Dunne**, Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment, to discuss Traub’s new book, *The Freedom Agenda: Why America Must Spread Democracy (Just Not the Way George Bush Did)*. The event was moderated by **David DeBartolo**, Director of Dialogue Programs at POMED.

**Jim Traub began by lamenting the fact that the Bush Administration has contaminated U.S. democracy promotion efforts by linking them indelibly with bold, reckless ventures like the Iraq war.** He said there is now a growing mood of retrenchment and realism, and the next administration will have a difficult time pushing for reform after the failures of the Bush policy. **Traub said the policy failed because of the magical belief in the transformative powers of democracy and our power to deliver it.**

Traub said that other than Iraq, Egypt was the only other place where President Bush made a serious attempt to foster political reform. He noted that both Mubarak and the Bush administration back away from reform after Egypt’s 2005 elections had an undesirable outcome. **Traub discussed the inherent problem in U.S. efforts to promote democracy: it is difficult to push an autocrat to act in a way that works against his own privilege and self-interest.**

**Traub noted that Pakistan is the test case to prove if democracy is the long-term answer to terrorism, and said Pakistan will take up most of the oxygen of the next administration’s efforts at democracy promotion.** He contrasted Pakistan’s recent overwhelming support for democratic reform and rule of law, with Egypt’s relative apathy and lack of progress. He said the differences are historical and cultural, as the Pakistani public has a long history of the expectation of civil democratic rule which is not shared in Egypt.

He then discussed the difference between ‘high’ democracy promotion, which includes big public acts of diplomacy; and ‘low’ promotion, which works to support and improve an ongoing organic process with aid and development programs. He said that the ‘low’ method is best for the Arab states, though it is still important to hold regimes accountable for civil rights abuses.

Asked about the lasting impact of U.S. hypocrisy in supporting dictatorship, Jim Traub said that doing the right thing can do much to cancel out a history of doing the wrong thing. **He said the U.S. cannot undermine regional reformers and abandon them after we have encouraged them.**

**Traub concluded by saying that the U.S. must come to terms with the region's Islamist parties, and recognize the enormous differences between them.** He said we should start by accepting the legitimacy of the Muslim Brotherhood, as they have been a consistent, positive democratic force in Egypt, and forcing them into the political landscape will push them to make moderating compromises.

**Michele Dunne** praised Jim Traub's book for its cogent analysis of the historical development of U.S. democracy promotion. **She said that though U.S. credibility has suffered, support for democracy as the best form of government is still very high in the Middle East, even among those fiercely opposed to U.S. policy.** Dunne said that though prematurely forcing elections upon the Arab world was a mistake, the U.S. must continue to push for an expansion of the political sphere. She said we must pursue institutional change and respect for rule of law in tandem with sweeping electoral reform. **She also said foreign aid should be tied to conditions of quality of governance.** She noted that there is very little point in giving significant aid to corrupt and abusive regimes.

Dunne said that the U.S. is traumatized and troubled by the results of democracy promotion thus far. However, she disagreed with Traub's declaration that Pakistan will be the central focus of democracy promotion efforts. Dunne said we can't set the agenda in advance, and must instead react to indigenous demands for change. **She said she is concerned that the next administration will recoil from President Bush's policies on principle, and abandon the whole effort.** She said many of the development programs, especially MEPI, have proved their worth and are doing important work, and it would be a mistake to scrap them. **Dunne stressed that the U.S cannot remain neutral on democracy and human rights issues, as it will be seen as responsible whether it acts or not.**