



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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Project on Middle East Democracy, Middle East Institute, and Americans for Informed Diplomacy

“Democratic Development in the Middle East and North Africa”

Middle East Institute, 1761 N St. NW, MEI Boardman Room, 29 July 2008, 12 PM

The Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), the Middle East Institute (MEI), and Americans for Informed Diplomacy (AID) hosted a discussion with representatives from three conferences sponsored this spring by POMED and AID, in which young Middle Eastern and American leaders developed and ratified policy recommendations on how to improve America’s impact on Middle East reform. The participants included **Erika Spaet** and **Sara Ait Imoudden** from the Rabat Conference, **Dina Elshinnawi** and **Mohamed Sabbah** from the Cairo Conference, and **Emily Crawford** and **Tharwat Alazab** from the Amman Conference.

Spaet stated that **the U.S. can best support democratic reform in Morocco by helping to lessen the disconnect and mistrust between young Moroccans and the government.** To Spaet, the U.S. can support young Moroccan’s attempts for democratic reform by continuing to foster dialogue. The conference recommended involving the youth more in political life by establishing a youth quota in the political leadership of parties and through youth groups that develop spaces for young people to discuss politics. She also suggested enhancing civic education in schools. These recommendations, she concluded, would illustrate that political involvement could be a career, inculcate in young Moroccans what it means to be a citizen, and encourage participation in civil society.

Imoudden focused on the media and political dialogue. She stated that the burgeoning online media is especially important for young people as it allows them to express their opinions without fear of arrest. Imoudden remarked that bloggers and other online journalists needed to have rights to protect them from persecution. She suggested the U.S. fund more projects to support journalists. **The other recommendation she discussed was the continuance of people-to-people dialogue programs, which she believed were important in that it allowed for the exchange of ideas by young people and the growth of grassroots politics.** This type of interaction, according to Imoudden, would empower further dialogue and the growth of civil society as individuals come together for change.

Speaking as one of the representatives of the Cairo Conference, **Elshinnawi** stated that **U.S. policy towards Egypt needed to look towards the future of Egyptian leadership, as it would be a strategic imperative to strengthen Egyptian democracy and economic development.** She said the U.S. should not look at political reform in Egypt as an either/or choice between the Islamists and Mubarak and should use its leverage to open up the political system for broader choices. She also suggested increased cultural exchanges and U.S. help in reforming Egypt’s

education system. **Sabbah** recommended greater US-Egypt engagement with more focus on economic development rather than military assistance. **He also asserted that a more reasonable U.S. policy in the region that takes into consideration Arab interests would cause democratic reforms to be perceived in a better light.**

Speaking on behalf of the Amman Conference, **Alazab** stated that there were three things the youth of Jordan would like to see. First, **the U.S. should help spur reform by emphasizing exchange programs as bringing young Americans and Jordanians together would bring the two nations closer together and make both sides acquainted with the world.** Second, she would like to see a greater focus on the issue of Iraqi refugees, as it is a source of economic and social worry in Jordan. Lastly, she hoped there would be a reconsideration of U.S. foreign policy, which has been appreciated by Jordanians, but is beginning to cause problems and is causing the appreciation to lessen.

Crawford said more support for online journalism and outreach is needed. **One area of focus in which U.S. assistance could be beneficial is with video conferencing, which allows for more face-to-face conversation and only needs little extra funding.** Another way the U.S. could help would be through using the Fulbright Program to provide a forum in which Middle Eastern and U.S. scholars could interact. She concluded by suggesting that the U.S. needed to be more honest about Jordan's political and human rights situation, and not create a rosier picture much different from what the average Jordanian sees on the ground.