



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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**“Obama’s Multilateral Engagement:
What Does It Mean for Democracy & Human Rights in the Middle East?”**
The Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) and Freidrich-Ebert Stiftung (FES)
SEIU Building, 1800 Massachusetts Ave. NW, 1st floor

June 30, 2010, 12:00 PM – 2:00 PM

On June 30, 2010, POMED and FES held a panel discussion focusing on multilateral engagement in the quest for democracy and human rights in the Middle East. The discussion, moderated by **Knut Panknin** of FES, came at a timely and imperative moment as the G20 is in the midst of multilateral talks this week. The panel of experts included **Neil Hicks**, International Policy Advisor for Human Rights First; **Heather Hurlburt**, Executive Director of the National Security Network; **Suzanne Nossel**, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State at the Bureau of International Organization Affairs; and **Radwan Ziadeh**, Founding Director of the Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies and Executive Director of the Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies.

Suzanne Nossel opened the discussion by reviewing current U.S activities in the “multilateral arena.” She explained that the **United States is committed to multilateral engagement that is essentially “principled and result-oriented,”** meaning that the U.S. is interested not only in enhancing American values in the multilateral forum, but also in pursuing efforts that will bring about tangible results. Elaborating on this assessment, Nossel laid out five premises regarding multilateral engagement on human rights issues:

1. **There are limitations and strengths to multilateral engagement.** Nossel argued the UN has been the least effective institution and “the weakest leg of the stool” albeit for political reasons, and not structural ones.
2. **The U.S. is fundamentally optimistic and hopeful that through hard work, positive results will be achieved.**
3. **The U.S. is collaborative, and “we cannot get anything done on our own.”**
4. **The U.S. works beyond governments, with NGOs as partners and with the UN Secretariat, to address democracy and human rights issues.**
5. **The U.S. will err on the side of engagement to shape policy, rather than absenting to discredit institutions.**

Speaking on the role of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) and its effectiveness, Nossel argued that significant progress has been made. President Obama’s Cairo Address set the tone for U.S. participation in the HRC, and since the U.S. has joined, the HRC has met three times in Geneva. The Council has tried to move away from Israeli-Palestinian issues, and toward handling a broader array of human rights challenges, including in Kyrgyzstan, Guinea, Somalia, and Afghanistan. Nossel also highlighted the passage of a joint resolution on freedom of expression along with Egypt at the UNHCR, while pointing to the challenge of addressing religious defamation concerns without curtailing freedom of speech.

The U.S. has been tough-minded when necessary, particularly on Iran. On the one year anniversary of Iran's 2009 elections and subsequent government crackdown on protests, the HRC prepared a statement on the matter that was read despite Iran's attempts to block it.

Nossel closed by posing two fundamental questions: **How do we get Middle Eastern countries to become more constructive in human rights dialogues, and how do we incentivize states to abide by the universal human rights charter?**

Neil Hicks described the many shortcomings of the HRC, a body weakened by bloc voting and what is viewed as an imbalanced focus on Israeli human rights issues. The Organization of the Islamic Conference and the Arab Group, joined by the Non-Aligned Movement, have consistently worked to undermine the effectiveness of the HCR and to gain impunity for their actions. As Hicks pointed out, this group is composed of many U.S. allies who have poor human rights records, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan.

This is the environment in which the U.S. entered in 2009. Hicks asserted that being a political body, the HRC has its strengths and weaknesses. HRC membership is held by governments and therefore states act and vote in accordance with national, strategic interests. Rights and standards that are held as universal in theory are in fact applied contextually. Routine attempts are made to restrict freedoms based on pleas for combating terrorism or adapting to cultural specificity. Because of this, Hicks argued, the Council will never operate with objectivity or judicial independence. While aspiring to these two pillars, the Obama administration can focus on its third pledge for the HRC, transparency. The primary benefit gained from the political nature of the HRC is that national prestige is linked to a state's human rights record. As Hicks suggested, **“even the most cynical of non-human rights compliant states cares what is said about it and what happens at the Council.”**

Looking forward, Hicks argued that a serious review of human rights in the United States would provide a strong model for other members that **“critical self-examination is a sign of strength, not weakness.”** Another immediate opportunity for the U.S. to push for incremental progress within the HRC will come in 2011 as the UN General Assembly carries out a five year review of the Council. In Hicks's opinion, the U.S. should build support for an agenda of achievable reforms, including protecting the rights of international and local NGOs and activists, to include these groups in the UPR process; requiring regional groups to hold contested elections for seats on the Council; and establishing rules to ensure balanced state interventions during the interactive dialogue phase of the UPR process. These measures will hold governments more accountable before the HRC. As Hicks emphasized, **the HRC should not be the sole mechanism for promoting human rights, but should only be regarded as one of many tools.**

Radwan Ziadeh assessed the future of the Arab states and the HRC, observing that as only five members in the UN Security Council have veto rights, many countries see the HRC as a forum to enhance their own demands and concerns. Also problematic for the HRC's legitimacy, Ziadeh explained, are its negative reaction to the Goldstone Report and the American rejection of special rapporteurs for Afghanistan and Iraq. The Council did prove helpful in the case of Egypt, when many Egyptian organizations joined together to raise their voices on human rights concerns during the UPR. He expressed little faith in treaty bodies, such as conventions on torture that various authoritarian, Middle Eastern regimes have signed.

In considering other multilateral frameworks, Ziadeh mentioned the Forum for the Future and the Arab League. In his opinion, the former provided an innovative forum for high-ranking officials and civil society leaders to interface. But the latter has developed a human rights charter that falls below international standards and is rejected by civil society groups in the Middle East.

Heather Hurlburt took a comparative approach to analyzing U.S. multilateral efforts on democracy and human rights promotion in the Middle East. She considered the case study of Latin America, but stated that it is not similar to that of the Arab world; in the Americas, the strength and commitment of civil society proved the driving difference for democracy. Then, at the end of this process, the Organization of American States became a functioning tool for democracy promotion. Turning to other regional organizations, Hurlburt underscored that bodies such as the African Union do not take human rights seriously. Yet in the last decade, democracy has enjoyed many success stories on the African and Asian continents.

Hurlburt then posited that the U.S. might gain from recalling two lessons learned during the Cold War and Eastern Europe's process of democratization. First, in order to win human rights provisions, the U.S. had to make some economic concessions and sacrifice a degree of its legitimacy. And second, while it was politically damaging at the time to make these concessions, there were strategic benefits for the U.S. in the long run. She wondered whether the Helsinki Accords had application for democracy promotion efforts in the Middle East; perhaps lessons can be gained from that experience as well.

Hurlburt raised the question of whether the U.S. is doing enough to coordinate dialogue between human rights activists, states, and civil society. She affirmed that a major strength of the Helsinki Accords was that they publicized U.S. support for democracy advocates that were struggling behind the Iron Curtain. **Hurlburt asked the audience and her fellow speakers what a grand bargain on human rights, democracy, and security—similar to the Helsinki accords—might look like when considering the Middle East.**

Hicks reminded the audience that the Helsinki accords were unique in that participants shared a similar cultural identity. This may point to an advantage for the Middle East because there is a common identity shared by Arabs that may provide an avenue for discussion.

Radwan Ziadeh regarded the democratization process in Eastern Europe as quite different from any form of democratization in the Middle East. According to Ziadeh, European states already had democratic models to follow. In the Middle East, however, there is only a “family of dictators.” On a more positive note, Ziadeh was hopeful that **Mohamed ElBaradei's political campaign might not only play a decisive role in future democratic developments in Egypt, but may also send an “important message” to the rest of the region.**

Responding to a question from an attendee about the importance of Western economic investments and entrepreneurial efforts in the Middle East, **Nossel** said that **empowering citizens to play a bigger role in society and creating economic opportunity for them through establishing a vibrant financial sector would support greater political and social activism.**