



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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“One Year After Cairo: Has U.S. Engagement Improved the Prospects for Reform in the Arab World?”

Freedom House and the Project on Middle East Democracy

Senate Visitors Center, Room 209

May 26, 2010, 11:00 AM – 12:30 PM

Freedom House and the Project on Middle East Democracy co-hosted an event at the Capitol Visitor Center to explore the effects of **President Obama's** new approach to the Arab World, the current challenges for democracy and human rights in the region, and the prospects for changes in U.S. policy to bring about a lasting impact. **Tamara Wittes**, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, provided remarks on how the president's Cairo speech has shaped the last year of Middle East policy. Deputy Director of Freedom House **Thomas. O Melia** then moderated a group of 3 panelists: **Dina Guirguis**, Research Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy; **Andrew Albertson**, Executive Director of POMED; and **Stephen Grand**, Director of the U.S. Relations with the Islamic World project at the Brookings Institution.

Thomas O. Melia opened with a brief comment about the previous year's effort toward promoting democracy and reform. “The president is finding his voice on these issues as he's governed into his second year,” Melia said. “More and more people in the State Department and USAID are starting to get the message as it's being repeated and getting more texture over time.” However, Melia maintained that the world is becoming less free, and he has yet to hear from the administration that they have internalized this reality and used it to inform of policy.

Next, **Tamara Wittes** delivered a speech and recounted how her own experience has solidified her belief that “promoting democratic reform is central to U.S. interests, and that is why I took the job [at the State Department].” She relayed the administration's view of foreign policy: **“What lies at the heart of America's global influence is not just military might or economic dynamism, but the power of an idea ... Freedom and democracy are fundamental to our strategy for security, and therefore promoting these things aren't in opposition to our other foreign policy goals, but rather are inextricably linked to them.”** The Cairo speech, she said, was in many ways a mission statement for U.S. foreign policy. Wittes went on to delineate the three principles that inform the administration's approach:

- **Mutuality:** “That we seek relations that are based upon mutual respect, mutual interest, and mutual responsibility.”
- **Shared commitment to universal values:** “Liberty and equality are not ours alone, but are rooted in international law, and shared by people in every region of the world. We root ourselves in those shared values when we engage in dialogue.”
- **Engaging more broadly with citizens as well as governments:** “The ability of [citizens] around the world is powerful, indispensable, and undeniable. So it's central to our approach to engage with citizens and civil society, providing direct support to local activists.”

With regard to Yemen, Wittes explained that MEPI is instituting programming at the national and community level, and its directly supporting the people of Yemen who have done well to build a thriving civil society sector. Iraq has also seen some real progress in the last few years, she said, most notably in the form of a **progressive NGO law that allows groups to implement effective advocacy campaigns**. “The U.S. has made it very clear to Iraqi leaders that the next government be inclusive, democratic, and representative,” and U.S. policy will pursue the goal of a democratic Iraq that is stable, sovereign, and self-reliant.

“Iran aspires to a role of global importance,” Wittes said, “but it cannot earn respect until it respects its own people.” She claimed that the administration has been working with international partners to shine a light on widespread arrests of peace protesters, threats of execution, and severe sentences. **“But we want to support, and not supplant local voices in Iran.”**

Wittes is also encouraged by an “explosion and dynamism” in Arab civil society, which has led to a new generation of local activists. **“We recognize our responsibility to empower these civil society groups,” she said, “and that’s why we couple our bilateral and multilateral diplomacy with supporting these groups. It’s all aimed at empowering local citizens to advocate, to organize, and to lead.”**

Egypt is an important focal point in this effort, since the upcoming months will present an historic opportunity for the Egyptian people to express their views about who will run and win in the parliamentary and presidential elections. **“We’re committed to sustaining our support for Egyptian civil society through direct funding and diplomatic dialogue,”** she said, claiming that the level of U.S. assistance to registered NGOs has remained constant in recent years. **“We know that engagement is no guarantee of agreement,” she said, “but having an open dialogue face to face can often have more of an impact than shouting behind a barricade.”**

Dina Guirguis followed Wittes’ remarks and kept the discussion focused upon Egypt. “[Obama’s] speech was widely perceived as a home run in the region,” she said, “but a deteriorating situation on the ground in Egypt and elsewhere has created a widespread perception that there is a lack of coherent action apart from individual meetings – rhetoric must be married to action.” **Noting that the renewal of Egypt’s Emergency Law was “sadly predictable,” Guirguis argued that it “signals a serious failure on the part of the Obama administration to leverage the feel good effect from the Cairo speech to create real change on the ground.”** But there is another chance for the administration to get it right, she said, referring to the upcoming elections. “The U.S. ought to strongly express our interest in having a modicum of a level playing field – free fair, and transparent elections should be a focus.

Andrew Albertson agreed with Guirguis’ critique of the past year of administration policy, and added that the initiatives that followed the Cairo speech simply didn’t live up to the scope or the moral scale of what Obama articulated. “There was a list of about fourteen initiatives that just weren’t up to the task ... A major goal held by many was to convince Egypt to drop its Emergency Law and replace it with a counter-terrorism law, but [the administration’s] strategy has not born out this kind of result.” Albertson acknowledged that the administration has a number of serious challenges and crises it must confront in a variety of areas, but he argued that **it is much easier for other crises to knock a policy (such as one geared toward democracy and human rights) off the rails when the administration’s agenda is insufficiently grounded in these principles.** One of the challenges, he said, is “how do we plan to convey to these countries that we care about more than just our own security.” Aside from the

public diplomacy, however, he noted that there's a real problem of social and economic stagnation that's rooted in political issues, and it's important for the administration to engage in that area as well.

Taking a different tack, **Stephen Grand** framed the issue as “short-term versus long-term.” The **short-term view**, he said, is that a breakthrough in Egypt or Iran might have vast consequences for the region as a whole, in which case the U.S. government should pull out all the stops to make that happen. Counter to that, the **long-term view** suggests that if the administration were to take that short-term approach, it would risk looking just like the Bush administration and inevitably run into many of the same problems. “The U.S. had a real credibility problem with issues of democracy promotion due to the last administration,” he said. “The instincts of the Bush administration were largely right, but the approach was so intertwined with what we were doing in Iraq that we ran into a lot of problems.” **One of the lessons from that period is that if democracy comes, “it’s going to come organically from within ... and it requires a long-term investment in people” to empower people to achieve their own goals.**

Wittes then responded to the panelists’ comments, and emphasized that **“engagement is not a policy, it’s a tool, and we have a lot of tools in our toolbox – engagement is not an end in itself.”** She also insisted that the president’s speech in Cairo was not about a series of specific initiatives or launching programs, but rather about outlining a framework of principles that will inform our approach in the region. More broadly, failure in one instance of engagement doesn’t discourage U.S. diplomats. “We’re constantly seeking how best to employ all the policies that we have” to pursue the sorts of changes that people on the ground desire. But she returned to the notion of “mutual responsibility” to underscore that the **U.S. cannot achieve these things on its own, and the “best we can do is seek to build partnerships wherever we can.”**

However, Tom Melia pushed back on the notion that the Cairo address wasn’t intended to spur new programs, saying that **“in the weeks and months after June 4 last year, there were meetings about how to implement the Cairo speech, there were checklists and programs that were developed ... and it was one of the things that made the Cairo speech as important as we’re treating it here today.”**

In response to a question about reconciling differences in policies for social groups and military policies for extremist groups, Wittes said that the administration firmly believes that it can combat terrorism while protecting civil liberties and human rights. She also addressed a question about the overwhelming amount of military aid relative to economic aid toward Egypt, saying that “our assistance is designed in terms of our own interests and to support our interests. Our security partnership [with Egypt] is important in the region, and these are priorities that are shared ... I believe we can walk and chew gum at the same time.”

Finally, Wittes responded to a question about the lack of U.S. support for Yemeni women and youth by reporting that MEPI is putting together a new assistance package that will help support citizen participation. **“The inclusion of women and young people is one of our programmatic priorities,”** she said.