



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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The Project on Middle East Democracy and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

“Strategies for Engaging Political Islam: A Middle East, U.S. and E.U. Dialogue”

Henry L. Stimson Center, 1111 19th St, NW, February 26, 2009, 12:00 pm

POMED and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung hosted a panel discussion on practical strategies for engaging political Islam. Current policies of engagement by the U.S. and E.U. (where they exist at all) often diverge on methods and objectives. However, as Islamists represent a major political force in the Middle East it will be crucial to determine a cohesive strategy going forward.

Panelists addressing this issue included **Ruheil Gharaibeh**, Deputy Secretary General of the Islamic Action Front in Jordan; **Shadi Hamid**, Director of Research for POMED; **Zoé Nautré**, Visiting Fellow at the German Council on Foreign Relations in Berlin; **Mona Yacoubian**, Special Adviser for the Muslim World Initiative, Center for Conflict Analysis and Prevention at USIP; and was moderated by **Nathan Brown**, Director of the Institute for Middle East Studies at George Washington University.

As Islamist parties are often seen in a negative light by the West, **Ruheil Gharaibeh** began the discussion by outlining the values and policies of the Islamic Action Front (IAF). He explained that the IAF renounces violence and is committed to peace and social reform that is based on wide-ranging issues from enhancing education and philanthropic works to combating poverty and unemployment. The party participates in elections, holds seats in the Jordanian government, and is very much involved in the labor movement. In working on reforms at the national level, **the IAF supports a new initiative calling for the transformation of Jordan into a true constitutional democracy.** Gharaibeh argued that this must be done not through regime change or a military coup, but through the legitimate process of amending the constitution and reshaping relations between the different stakeholders in an effort to foster national unity. This initiative constitutes “a leap forward for Islamist movements,” as it is supported by tangible policies and not just general rhetoric.

As for U.S. policy in the region, Gharaibeh expressed that **while the U.S. calls for the expansion of democracy, its strategies have been fraught with double standards.** This fact is not lost on the people of the Middle East, who have witnessed U.S. support of corrupt authoritarian regimes for strategic interests at the expense of democracy. These problems have only been exacerbated by the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine. Moving forward, he argued that **the Obama administration should put an end to supporting despotic regimes, enact fair policies toward Israel-Palestine, and make foreign aid to the region conditional on meaningful democratic reforms.** He also urged the West not to fear all Islamist political movements as the moderate ones represent the best force in combating extremism and providing a legitimate voice for the will of the people. Lastly, Gharaibeh stressed that if the West and Islamists are to engage in

fruitful cooperation they must move beyond talking *about* each other and begin talking *to* each other.

Mona Yacoubian continued the discussion by focusing on ways the U.S. should continue to build on efforts to engage political Islam. Citing the example of Algeria in the late 1980's, she outlined three lessons that should be learned from this experience. First, **institution-building must play a key role in the way the U.S. interacts with Islamists**. By focusing support on strengthening a system of checks and balances, transparency, and the rule of law, the concerns over Islamists undermining democratic reforms can be assuaged. Second, there should be greater effort given to the formation of Islamist-secularist coalitions with an interest in democratic reform. Third, an **opening of the political space in these societies can contribute greatly to increased pragmatism of Islamist parties as political participation often begets moderation**. The notion that these parties are static because they are based in ideology is simply not true, Yacoubian argued. In order to survive as political entities, Islamist parties must be dynamic and capable of evolving. Through her research she has determined that in reality, Islamist parties are generally some of the more transparent and democratic entities in the region, working to combat fraud and implement social programs.

Democracy promotion continues to remain strategically significant to the U.S. For this reason, **engagement must take place in the broader context of regional issues** (vis a vis the Israel-Palestine conflict and U.S. military presence in the greater Middle East). Yacoubian stressed that **extremism is pervasive and moderate Islamists provide a necessary and effective counterbalance**. Furthermore, it is hard to advocate for democracy while excluding legitimate Islamist actors. In small ways, and often taking place under the radar, the U.S. has worked toward engaging Islamists and these efforts must continue. Funding to institutions such as NDI and IRI are important steps in building and strengthening political parties throughout the region. Going forward, it will be crucial to measure the successfulness of these programs and continue to build on efforts already in place.

In explaining the E.U. approach toward political Islam, **Zoé Nautré** emphasized that while there is no official policy on engagement, many governments have taken up various methods. From cultural exchanges to the appointment of officials responsible for interacting with Islamists, E.U. nations have been working on a **brand of engagement that is more about gaining knowledge than it is about shaping politics**. This, Nautré argued, is the main difference between U.S. and E.U. approaches. European nations involved in the region take on a more observatory role, while the U.S. tends to be more intrusive – this distinction allows the E.U. greater credibility among Middle Easterners. Nautré acknowledged that this policy may be effective in building relationships and mutual understanding; however, it does not address any of the real problems facing the region. She argued for greater U.S.-E.U. coordination and recommended a reevaluation of strategies so that governments in the Middle East can be held more accountable; but cautioned against the formulation of a “grand strategy” that could be viewed as imperialistic.

Shadi Hamid concluded the discussion by highlighting the issue at the very core of the Islamist dilemma – theoretically, **the U.S. wants to spread democracy but at times it fears democracy's outcome**. If the U.S. is truly serious about democracy promotion then it must also be serious about political Islam; there is no way around engagement. However, both sides have

legitimate concerns if direct engagement is to take place. There is a chance that moderate Islamists will not continue on the path to moderation indefinitely. Nevertheless, **it is better to engage now and build relations before these parties come to power, then to wait for the inevitable and have no leg to stand on.** Moving forward, the **U.S. will need a bold policy rooted in mutual interests and reciprocity.** Hamid disagreed with Nautré's assessment against a grand strategy for engagement, arguing that it will be important to outline strategic objectives in order to determine a specific policy direction. The shared interest of strengthening democracy in the Middle East will form the foundation of the U.S.-Islamist relationship. The next step will be determining what each side wants from the other. What does the U.S. want? Hamid explained that the main U.S. strategic interest involves security. There must be guarantees that if one of these parties comes to power there will be strong efforts made to combat terrorism, maintain or build relations with Israel, and determine its stance on militant parties such as Hizbollah and Hamas. In return, the U.S. could actively pressure regimes to allow Islamists a greater role in the political system and stand behind these parties in their efforts. These considerations represent significant political risks and the need to make difficult decisions. However, ignoring the issues not only disregards the reality of the situation, but will also make future engagement much more challenging.