



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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Last Chance: The Middle East in the Balance A Discussion with David Gardner

1740 Massachusetts Ave NW, Washington, D.C. 20036
12:30 – 2:00 pm, September 9, 2009

The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) hosted a discussion Wednesday with **David Gardner**, Chief Leader Writer and former Middle East correspondent for the *Financial Times*. Mr. Gardner has recently published the book *Last Chance: The Middle East in the Balance*, which attempts to address underlying currents of Middle Eastern dysfunction. The discussion began with a brief introduction from Mr. Gardner and was followed by a question and answer session.

Discussing the book, Mr. Gardner explains that he attempted to create an overarching survey of the region and comes to the conclusion that the Middle East is in a quagmire of despotism, for which both the Arab people and the West are responsible. The U.S., U.K., and other European powers prop-up regional strongmen to produce a “delusional” regional stability, which is incubating a popular “blind rage” against the West.

The West’ actions allowed tyrants to remove all refuges for development from anywhere other than the mosque and all but guaranteed Islamist victories in Lebanon and Palestine. **Islamic revivalism has combined with the list of Muslim grievances to create a potent liberation theology**, which is comparable to nationalist movements in 19th century Europe. Just as fascism mutated from this nationalism, extremist jihadism has grown from Islamism and **the goal of the West should be not to stop Islamism, but to prevent its migration to jihadist extremism.**

The old approach to the region has failed and Gardner argues that the West must choose to foster – or at a minimum not prevent – forms of democratic expression. He believes this will lead to an Islamist rise in power that could further lead to a short-term period of illiberalism, **but the west must learn to live with the Islamists consequences.** Unless Arabs can find their way out of tyranny, their people will live miserable lives and will breed extremism and failed states. It is up to the people to claw out of this, the West cannot “stomp on their hands”.

Answering a question about regional political economy, the Dubai development model, and power dynamics within individual countries, Mr. Gardner begins by **asserting that no Arab leader rules in absolute power, but is instead a servant of the country’s institutions.** As an example, he cites Egyptian President **Hosni Mubarak**’s inability to pass investment reform that would have limited the power of the secret service and another incident in which Mubarak was kept uninformed about a Jam’at Islamia attempt to establish a separate state in Imbaba. He emphasizes the idea that the mukhabarat (intelligence services) are the real centers of power by citing Saudi **Prince Nayyaf**’s rebuff to reformers invited to Riyadh as part of **King Abdullah**’s National Dialogue project in 2003.

The approach to develop democracy through economic development, thus creating a liberal middle class who can then liberalize the country, Gardner believes is ill-advised. Incorporating business people into politics, as occurred when 64 Jordanian businessmen won parliament seats, does not create

reform. Instead, it creates a larger pool of insiders with a vested interest in the regime. **The economy first approach also serves as an alibi for tyrants to push back reforms** by claiming that they cannot create democratic reform until economic benchmarks are met. Mr. Gardner is impressed with some of the Emirate advances; however the sheer lack of size of any emirate country makes the model untenable for larger countries.

Discussing previous Western projects to development the Middle East, the author sees the Union of the Mediterranean as an incoherent effort designed to offset Turkey's goals for EU accession. The Barcelona process of 1995 was more coherent and did help resource poor countries, but failed to understand the nature of the regimes.

When confronted about the idea of a short-term illiberal Islamist period turning into a long-term period, Mr. Gardner points to a number of movements to argue **that Islamic based reform movements have continuously promoted a form of constitutional government**. In his argument he includes the reformer **Afghani** in Egypt, the 2003 Saudi Vision for the Future of the Nation document laying out a constitutional monarchy, the Jordanian Charter of 1989, and the Shi'a leadership in Iraq's decision to look to the Iranian constitutional revolution of 1906 rather than the Islamic revolution for leadership models. Islam is only one pillar of legitimacy and limiting democracy to prevent the rise of Islamists serves as the perfect alibi for political stagnation.

Answering a question about his approach to hold elections first, then to approach liberalization (the process that would lead to the period of illiberalism), he states that he would rather civil institutions be developed, but that the West is not in the habit to work with institutions over leaders as was the case with the British closure of the serious fraud office during the al-Yamama scandal. "Elections are not the panacea, but you cannot deny democratic impulses."

Asked about King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, Gardner believes that he is attempting to put forth real reform, but the political tension with the security service, the sons of **King Fahd**, and the Wahhabi clerics severely limits his abilities.

Discussing Turkey's influence in the region, he commends the way the AKP conducted 41,000 interviews across the country to recruit from all ranges of society, **a move he considers a constitutional revolution**. He feels the Arab world looks to Turkey because it is a success, not a model to transplant, and because the West had signed onto Turkey's government by 2007 when Western governments supported the AKP over the army.

Lastly, he warned against recent moves by the British and French to deal with "the Muslim community." By doing that you are conferring power to clerics to usurp power and shut off other opportunities for people of different backgrounds. **When discussing reform we need to deal with the diverse reality of the region and not a construct monolith uniform bloc**. Building this ideology is deeply unhelpful to many that see their rights usurped.