



# PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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**United Nations Development Program Washington Roundtable**  
***UNDP Report 2009: Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries***  
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace  
July 29, 2009

The United Nations Development Program released its Arab Human Development Report in Beirut last week. A half-day roundtable discussion in Washington on July 29 followed the release. UNDP's Washington Senior Advisor **David Yang** began the day's program, highlighting that an evolution in thinking about "human development" in the past 20 years has led to widespread emphasis on the integral role *human security* plays as a rearguard and precondition for human development.

**Amat Alsoswa**, Assistant Administrator of UNDP and Director of its Regional Bureau for Arab States introduced the UNDP's 2009 Arab Development Report. The achievements of past reports, she noted, is that they have catalyzed unprecedented debate about a range of sensitive issues in the Arab world. Concluding that *reform* will ensure greater respect for human security, the 2009 report concludes that the path to reform must be based on three pillars of knowledge, freedom and women's empowerment. The report recommends that states develop institutional capacities to deliver development and human security on a wide range of issues (i.e. economic, social and health). Beyond urging action by states, she said, this report encourages cooperation among local Arab civil society and governments to work toward human security goals.

### **The Arab State and Human Security: Panel**

**Baghat Korany** from the American University in Cairo, and a key player in writing the report, discussed the criteria for state legitimacy that is suggested in the report. An important conclusion of the report is that states are not always protectors of the people, but can be actors that threaten human security. Thus the methodology of the report focused on actual state performance, he emphasized, not laws or promises. Despite constitutional principles and what appears to be a balance of power, often times these principles are redefined to enhance the control of political authority, Korany said.

Korany focused on the lack of tolerance by political authority that allows for misuses of the state monopoly on force, and the abuse of checks and balances. In these contexts, opposition forces can be repressed for ostensibly breaching traditional concepts of "security." Additionally, in countries where decades of emergency law have pervaded, harsh military courts often replace civilian courts, thereby relegating citizen rights to national security concerns.

The report also surveyed Arab states' relations with the outside world, and their role as an intermediary between the international community and local society. By also considering states' respect for international conventions, the report was able to focus on domestic relationships among political authority and civil society actors.

**Marina Ottaway**, Middle East Program Director at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace commented on the state of the Arab state, particularly in the report's suggestions of urgent and practical reform. She then weighed in on the next steps toward solutions.

Focusing first on crystallized state identities, which are often self-perpetuated to serve specific interests of certain groups or the state, **Ottaway** noted that such identities hamper reform efforts and decrease state legitimacy. She agreed that state monopoly on the use of force is misapplied in many Arab countries to use coercion against citizens. This prompted her to ask what the solutions are to such entrenched problems?

Drawing prescriptions to Arab states' ailments is difficult in the context of a backsliding of democracy, reform and freedoms in the Arab world, she said. **The report correctly cites problems in the Arab state, Ottaway argued, but the tools for fixing them are weak**, because solutions hinge on three important factors: 1) The capacity of the state to push for reform; 2) The ability of citizens and civil society to demand reform; and 3) international pressure.

Domestically, **this is a period of decreasing political pressure from within** among political parties and civil society organizations. The weakness of parties and civil society is ensured by the state via limited or complex registration laws, among other constraints. She noted examples of a backsliding in democratic practices in the region, such as Egyptian and Moroccan regimes that have moved to "reoccupy" the political space, taking back any political openings that had occurred in the past decade. Yet she noted that women's participation and change is not necessarily on the decline and will be integral in the future. Solutions, therefore, cannot come from reform, she contended. **Solutions will come from modernizing the Arab state** and its political structures, rather than reforming it.

**This is paired with a weakening of the reformist drives in governments**, creating very poor prospects for reform in the near future, Ottaway argued. States no longer face the same pressures for reform as they did from the outside in the recent past, particularly from the Obama administration. Although she noted that POMED's [new budget and appropriations paper](#) finds commitments from the Administration for democracy and governance. If it commits money, but does not talk strategically about democracy in the region, then the U.S. is sending a very mixed message, she said.

**Korany** responded by suggesting that the Arab state is part of the problem, but is also part of the solution. He claimed that cooperation among diverse groups is integral to bringing change, but so is the Palestine issue, which is a roadblock for all reform efforts. Youth are another large and influential factor to be regarded in reference to prospects for reform, he noted. Although online activism and blogging is a vibrant force in the young community, he said that Arab youth are primarily concerned with their widespread unemployment rather than limited political liberties. Regarding the internet, **Ottaway** insisted that the internet is only a *tool*, not a panacea. It is not a guarantor for reform and change.

### **Roundtable: Why Have Obstacles to Arab Human Development Proven So Stubborn?**

The final discussion of the day was of particular interest to POMED's readers, focusing on why obstacles to Arab human development have persisted. Moderated by **Riz Khan**, the panelists were **Ambassador Wendy Chamberlin**, President of the Middle East Institute, **Thomas Friedman** of the *New York Times*, **Robin Wright**, formerly of the Woodrow Wilson Center, and again included **Bahgat Korany**.

With **Khan** prompting an open question and answer format, the panelists aired their views on the report and the challenges facing Arab human development. **Baghat Korany** noted that **the report identified seven main obstacles facing overall human security in the Middle East:** the environment, the state, the insecurity of vulnerable groups, poverty and unemployment, food safety and nutrition, health and human security, and the systematic insecurity of foreign intervention and military occupation. Still, **Robin Wright** remained optimistic that, as discouraging as the statistics were, **there is something dynamic happening under the surface of Middle Eastern societies about which we should be hopeful.** Even as Arabs move away from the West, they are also moving away from *jihadism* and are wrestling with their own identities.

**Thomas Friedman** brought up how depressing it was that seven years after the first Arab development report we are faced with an even worse report, as states have no incentive to change, civil society has no power and external forces have no legitimacy. **Ambassador Chamberlin** spoke on the U.S.'s role, noting that the Obama administration started on the right foot, and the tone of the Cairo speech was good. In the Arab world, however, there persists a “wait and see” mentality. Likewise, many U.S. programs have strong aspects. **MEPI, for example, is not all wrong-headed. It should, however not be linked to policy, instead being focused on people-to-people problems.**

Speaking on the challenge of building civil society, **Wright** said that there has been positive movement in this regard. For example, there have been increasing numbers of groups in Iran as well as the Arab world that are *hijab*-wearing, but do not desire the implementation of *sharia*. Iran itself is an interesting model, as the Arab world is watching developments there closely. **Just as in 1979, Iranians are making an example for the region by organizing massive marches as well as partaking in civil disobedience**—by refusing to buy products advertised on state TV or use SMS services that cooperated with the state.

**Friedman** noted that it is interesting that the country in the region experiencing the most political ferment is the one where the U.S. has zero presence—Iran. Within Iran mass political engagement is entirely internally driven, and that is why people are so excited about it. Change is happening in Iran because the Iranians told themselves that they must change. In the Arab world, particularly in autocratic, resource-rich states, that is unlikely to happen until oil reaches \$15 per barrel.

There are not only sad stories in the Arab world the panelists argued. **Wright** pointed out that there have been inspiring stories of citizens being proactive and taking matters into their own hands, as was the case with one Egyptian girl who has organized a major anti-female circumcision and human rights campaign. **Korany** said that **while imperfect, state-led feminism helps move things in the right direction**, as countries like Egypt set quotas for female participation in parliament. But, as one questioner pointed out, the situation in places like Saudi Arabia is still dire. There, **Chamberlin** noted, the U.S. has been balancing its relationship with the government on the basis of oil interests. Though women are not allowed to drive, many have been forced to in rural areas in order to find work. Even King Abdullah has jumped in to say that the ban on women driving is not a law, but a cultural norm. In any event, Chamberlin reasoned, **the youth bulge is going to make a big difference in the composition of Saudi society** as 60% of the students in Saudi colleges are women, many of whom are leaving the country to go to places like Dubai where they will be allowed to work.