



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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**“A Changing Middle East: Iran, Turkey, and Prospects for Peace”
The 2010 Foreign Policy Initiative Forum
W Hotel, 515 15th Street NW
Monday, November 15, 2010 4:15-5:15 pm**

On Monday evening, as part of the 2010 Foreign Policy Initiative Forum, a panel discussion was held titled “A Changing Middle East: Iran, Turkey, and Prospects for Peace.” The discussants were **Elliot Abrams**, of the Council on Foreign Relations, Ambassador **Eric Edelman**, of the Foreign Policy Initiative and Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, and **Reuel Gerecht** of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. The discussion was moderated by **Lee Smith** of the *Weekly Standard*.

Abrams began the discussion by focusing on the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. He described the Obama Administration’s policy as “stuck in a hole” over the settlement issue, saying that the recently negotiated 90-day freeze on building is pointless because it doesn’t include the area around Jerusalem. As Abrams pointed out, the area around Jerusalem is the most hotly contested area in the settlement debate, making any freeze that fails to address it moot. Abrams also added that the Administration is making two other mistakes with the 90-day freeze deal. First, **the promise to veto any “untoward” U.N. resolutions aimed at Israel, a form of support that Abrams called “historical” between the U.S. and Israel, should be a “matter of principle,” not a point of negotiation.** He included military aid in this formulation. The second mistake was ignoring the building of Palestinian institutions in the West Bank in favor of the peace process.

Edelman spoke next on Turkey’s orientation in the Middle East. Using Erdogan’s “blow up” at Davos in 2009 and the recent Mavi Marmara incident as touchstones, **Edelman said that the focus on Turkey’s foreign policy was missing the important “internal developments” occurring within Turkey.** The country is “having a debate about itself,” and the personalities of the current leadership will affect the result. **Edelman proposed four fundamental questions left unanswered after the rise of Kemal Ataturk in the early 20th century: 1.) What is the role of the military in politics? 2.) What is the role of the state in the economy? 3.) What is the role of religion in society? 4.) What is the role of ethnicity in the nation (i.e. the Kurdish question)?** Edelman said that, in some sense, it was the job of U.S. foreign policy to assist Turkey in answering these questions. The ascension of Turkey into the E.U. had long been thought to be a major step towards answering these questions, but the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has “taken it farther from that objective.” Edelman called Prime Minister Erdogan a “virtual dictator” and said that, in his view, the military does not aspire to rule. He used the 1980 coup as an example of the military’s desire to step away from power, saying they set up a civilian system that, while having 16 coalition governments in 22 years, lasted until 2002. He accused AKP of becoming “increasingly authoritarian” by using the E.U. criteria to damage the military, using the courts to silence media criticism, and wire-tapping “tens of thousands” of Turkish citizens. Edelman, in response to Turkey’s purported desire to increase its status in the Middle East, said that the country doesn’t have the “wherewithal” to be the regional superpower. And while Erdogan has a “certain amount” of popularity on the Arab street, Arab governments are not as friendly and Erdogan has “ruined” Turkey’s relationship with Israel, making any attempt to aspire to regional hegemony “unlikely” to succeed.

Edelman ended by offering three policy prescriptions. 1.) The U.S. should stop “shying away” from criticizing human rights abuses and media crack downs in Turkey. They need to be addressed. 2.) The new leader of the Republican Peoples Party (CHP), Kemal Kilicdaroglu, has a “personal manner” that suggests that he might lead a “real opposition.” The U.S. needs to ensure good contacts with him and other opposition groups. 3.) The U.S. must stop “coddling” AKP. There is a “moral hazard” in the way the U.S. and Turkey are interacting presently, according to Edelman, and a turn towards a “transactional relationship” may be needed to remind AKP that they need the U.S. more than the U.S. needs them.

Gerecht began his talk by saying that Iran is “in a state of vengeance.” Supreme Leader Khameini is “getting even” and trying to prevent another repeat of either the student movement in 1999, or the Green Movement of 2009. **Khameini is “cleansing the universities,” threatening prominent Green Movement members families, and wants the opposition “thoroughly crushed” before any further elections are held.** He also spoke about the internal tensions between President Ahmadinejad and speaker of the Majlis Ali Larijani, saying that Larijani views Ahmadinejad as a “plebe.” Gerecht argued that the “worsening” economic situation may encourage the regime to more brutal and that the “status quo” is not going to come back. Mehdi Karroubi, Mir-Hossain Mousavi, and a number of the clerical establishment, who were loyalists to Grand Ayatollah Khomeini, are not going to return to the fold, according to Gerecht. **He also noted that Khameini “hates Obama” and that the Obama Administration’s offer to talk “was like poison” to the regime. They would have preferred more “Axis of Evil” rhetoric, Gerecht said. The regimes “greatest fear” is a “velvet revolution.”**

The moderator, **Lee Smith**, began the Q and A by asking Gerecht if Khameini hating Obama was a good thing or a bad thing. Gerecht replied that he didn’t think that was what Obama wanted, and that Obama thought he could “surmount differences” purely through his personality, which was proven incorrect.

In response to a question on Turkey’s being an “imperfect democracy” and the prospects for Turkey to become a “full democracy,” Edelman responded that it was a “tough question” and that while some reforms had taken place, the fact remained that the political party law is “flawed.” The parties “don’t allow for real change...you can’t throw the bums out.” He also reemphasized that military involvement was not always a bad thing, saying that the military has “protected the constitutional heritage” of Turkey.