



# PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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**“The Arab Uprisings and the United Nations”  
The Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) and the National Security Network  
1333 H St., Washington, D.C.  
Tuesday, September 13, 2011**

On Tuesday, the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) and the National Security Network (NSN) hosted a panel discussion with Dr. **James Zogby**, president of the Arab American Institute, **Geneive Abdo**, fellow at the Century Foundation and the National Security Network, and **Ted Piccone**, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. The event was moderated by **Heather Hurlburt**, executive director at NSN, with a welcome by **Stephen McInerney**, executive director at POMED.

**Stephen McInerney** opened the discussion by talking about the issue of the Arab uprisings in the upcoming U.N. General Assembly, and how the U.N. has played a major role in recent events, including the U.N. Human Rights Council’s action in Syria and Libya in addition to the work of the U.N. Development Programme (UNDP) and the U.N. Democracy Fund (UNDEF) in supporting democratic transitions.

Dr. **James Zogby** began by discussing polls the Arab American Institute conducted in the Middle East and North Africa about America’s standing in the region. The poll showed that two years after Obama’s Cairo speech, American standing in the region was at an all-time high, and now those numbers have dropped dramatically. He explained that the drop in approval was due to the high expectations held in the Arab world after Obama’s Cairo speech.

Zogby went on to discuss how Iran’s standing in the region is also lower than expected, as they are viewed as interfering in the region by many Arab respondents. Yet, their standing is still better than the U.S.’s and Israel’s. The U.N.’s numbers are also low as the institution is seen as an extension of U.S. policy. When discussing the polls regarding the Arab Spring, the question asked was “Do you think you’ll be better off in five years?” Most of the answers received were “not sure,” which suggests a sense of uncertainty. However, when asked will your children’s future be better off, the answers were very enthusiastic, which Zogby found worrisome as expectations are too high and therefore difficult to meet. He ended by discussing how the American “protective umbrella” in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, especially in Bahrain, is gone, which is leading to a shift in policies. In general, the Arab leaders are not going to be unwavering supporters of U.S. policy anymore.

**Geneive Abdo** discussed Iran’s motivations and perceptions on the Arab Spring. She stated that Iran is not in a place it hoped to be, as they wanted to capitalize on the chaos occurring in late January and early February and claim the Arab Spring as inspired by Iran’s Islamic Revolution in 1979. However, Iran has seen challenges to its regional influence through turmoil in Syria and

the invasion of Bahrain by Saudi troops. These actions are weakening Iran in the region, yet they are not discouraged. Iran is stepping up their support for Syria by shipping arms, helping manipulate the Internet, and sending elite military units to Syria.

She then discussed how the relationship between Iran and Turkey has deteriorated over the past few years. Turkey played the intermediately role between Iran and the U.S., and the outlook of that situation was optimistic. However, now the relationship is very complicated. Abdo ended her segment by discussing the role of President **Mahmoud Ahmedinejad** in Iran and the U.N. He will be attending the U.N. as one of the last few authoritarian leaders in power, and released the jailed U.S. hikers in anticipation that it will take pressure off of him and Iran. However, Abdo stated that his power is marginalized in Iran with many of his statements just purely rhetoric and should be taken lightly.

**Ted Piccone** transitioned to the U.N.'s role in the Arab uprisings. One of the most meaningful actions taken by the U.N. was the responsibility to protect, especially in Libya. There was an unprecedented pace of action by the U.N., leading to direct action. Piccone noted that the concern for peace and security for the people trumped the argument of sovereignty. However, he stated that the way the situation in Libya played out "rankled other member states." When the same situation occurred in Syria, the West could not get the same resolution for Syria.

He broadened the discussion to the region by talking about the situation in Tunisia and Egypt. Other U.N. agencies are playing a role in those states by talking to the big actors, especially the UNDP. There has been no action on Bahrain, as there is no interest to do so by the U.S., Saudi Arabia, or the other Arab states. He ended his segment by stating he is optimistic other Arab states will become more involved in the U.N. after public pressure increases to take action.

**Heather Hurlburt** began the question and answer section by asking if there will be more cooperation with the U.N. and the U.S. in the Middle East after the uprisings in the region. Abdo stated that when Saudi Arabia put troops in Bahrain, that really put pressure on the U.S. to react. Saudi "doesn't believe" it can fully rely on the U.S. since it supported the revolution in Egypt, but did nothing in Bahrain. Zogby noted the ultimate test for more Arab involvement in the U.N. will be the case for Palestinian statehood. "The Israelis are hysterical," he adds, that they are trying to "bully" to get their way in the U.N., which is one reason why the U.N. is not favored in the region. Abdo stated that Bahraini protesters are looking for external support for political reform. As the U.S. has forfeited that role by remaining silent, Bahrainis are looking for other actors in the form of the United Nations.

An audience member asked how the Arab Spring highlights the importance of non-violent action and what the U.S. can do to improve their standing in the world. Piccone stated the U.S. needs to get Egypt "right," as they are a big player in the region. Non-violence also played a huge role in Egypt, which turned out to be a very successful strategy. Abdo noted that the U.S. should "highlight" human rights more, which could give the U.S. a better standing in the world. Zogby said the U.S. is no longer on the "moral high ground, so they can't lecture on human rights anymore.

The last question raised was about the key signs that Assad's regime is weakening. Some of the key factors Abdo described are if the minority factions in the military start defecting and if the mercantile class leaves the regime's side. Zogby said that the situation in Syria could get worse before it gets better, but if some key groups lose fear, that could be a big turning point in the conflict.