



www.pomed.org ♦ 1611 Connecticut Ave NW, Suite 300 ♦ Washington, DC 20009

“Will Democratic Governance Take Hold in the Middle East?”
The International Republican Institute
1225 Eye Street NW Suite 700 Washington, DC 20005
Thursday, May 10, 2012 3:00 PM – 4:00 PM

On Thursday, The International Republican Institute (IRI) hosted an event discussing successes and challenges facing Arab countries in transition and others, as well as implications of these efforts for the future of the Arab Spring. Moderating the discussion was **Olin L. Wethington**, member of the Board of Directors of IRI. The panel featured **Marwan Muasher**, Vice President for Studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, **Michele Dunne**, Director of the Atlantic Council’s Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, and **Khaled Huneifat**, former mayor of Tafileh, Jordan.

Olin Wethington began by framing the discussion by stressing the need to first define what democratic governance will mean in the new Middle East. **Whether democratic governance will be, as the U.S. and much as the West understands it, a liberal democracy that can be measured by indicators** such as equality, human rights, basic freedoms, and a system of checks and balances. The second point addressed by Wethington to further frame the discussion is the need to understand **what the path forward will look like and how policy makers measure progress versus the definition**. While asserting that he was not an expert on the region, he made several statements about what he had observed thus far. First, he said the unfolding events have taught the international community that a rise to power may be democratic, but it does not “guarantee the content of government” and does not answer whether or not the majority can constitute tyranny. Wellington asserted that the new **Middle East could be divided into three regions: the largely autocratic, elite ruling families of the Gulf who own the legitimacy of their people, countries that are experiencing bottom up pressure as a result of popular unrest, and the top down reformers**.

Marwan Muasher urged the audience to view the ongoing transitions from a “30,000 foot view,” cautioning against over-reacting to day-to-day, inevitable mishaps, which he said are simply a natural part of transition. He said that the label, “**Arab Spring**” is misleading, and that he would rather prefer to call the events an Arab “awakening.” He went on to discuss the failure of the Arab world in developing pluralistic institutions after the end of colonial rule and Ottoman control. **The Arab world had been given two options: autocratic rule or religious opposition**. It is through this lens that Muasher declared that positive developments have begun to manifest themselves, in varying degrees, across the Arab world. Political groups are beginning to understand, said Muasher, that “they have to work on the ground” in order to “push ideas forward” and garner public support. Relatedly, Muasher said that minority groups are also taking heed of this lesson. They too need to work on the ground to secure their interests, as their autocratic protector is no longer in place. Additionally, “political holiness” and “religious observation” is over, said Muasher explaining to the audience that the people want

services, not religion. While he noted that the transition was an ongoing battle, and far from perfect, it is a natural process. Muasher further simplified the view of the region expelled by Wethington saying **that there are only two groups: Those who have time & those whose time is up.** Those that have time are working against the clock, working to stay “ahead of the street.” He contrasted the transition process of Morocco and Jordan in order to explain the top down reform process, which Muasher stated is the best chance of success. However difficult it might be to convince the regimes to share power, eventually reform will lead to power sharing and a legitimate legislative body. **Muasher concluded opining that the support for political Islam had peaked, and that support for political Islam will undergo a process of naturalization as the situation develops and the groups are tested.**

Michele Dunne began her remarks declaring **she was uncertain that democracy is something that “takes hold, but rather something people take a hold of.”** In this sense, democracy is a system by and for the people, and the citizens have the power to change their government. She then contrasted the “top down” reformers and the “bottom up” reformers, asserting that she believed the odds to be against the top down reformers. These reformers, said Dunne, will create better systems of government, but not democratic. However, countries experiencing bottom up pressure, like North Africa, are all at different places in transition but share a similar aspect: all of the said countries are negotiating the balance of power. She warned against declaring “Islamists” have come to power. Islamists in power leading to religion to playing a larger role leads to the wrong conclusion, said Dunne. **Social conservatism does not mean political conservatism. Rather, the bottom up pressure has forced a trend of political liberalism. Dunne concluded her comments noting that because the street can place pressure on the governments, there is a better chance that real change will happen.**

Khaled Huneifat spoke in Arabic and explained how tribalism and local governance affects the political system in Jordan. He reminded the audience that before Jordan was even a country, local governance in the form of popular tribal leaders was in place, and that these leaders garnered communal support through the delivery of services. However, **today local governance does not have popular support, due to the incapability of the leaders to deliver these services.** Huneifat stated that many leaders in Jordan are appointed, and do not have the qualifications necessary to function inside a political system, let alone solve community issues. **He said that the laws effecting local governance were made in a “security mentality” which prevented harmony in the councils. A large problem, he said, was that the leaders outside of Amman “do not have a strategic plan.”**

During the Q&A session, **Marwan Muasher** responded to questions to the extent the people in the Middle East define democracy as liberal democracy. Muasher said that the people in the region have good understanding of democracy, but rather the problem is that they lack leaders. Political liberalism continues to emerge as the dominant force. “Social conservatism is not exclusive,” said Muasher in agreement with Dunne. He urged the audience to look at the experience of Tunisia and Egypt. When outcomes that weren’t accepted by a certain constituency occurred, millions of people took to the street. “This will be a new corrective mechanism,” said Muasher. **Khaled Huneifat** discussed the future of Jordan. Although he was positive, he said that many challenges face Jordan. Some of which include lack of communication between Amman and the rural areas, false promises, the design of parliament, and people are not the real source of power. **“The parliament is designed to be disorganized,” said Huneifat.** Huneifat concluded saying that the people of Jordan want to move forward, and not get left behind.