

Democracy, Self-Interest and Ideology: A Discussion of U.S. Policy Towards Political Islam

Panel Summary:

America needs to reassess the best ways to promote democracy in the Muslim world and commit itself to engaging Islamists, said several scholars in a panel at Georgetown University on Nov. 15, 2005.

After giving a brief overview of American policy towards political Islam over the last several decades, Dr. John Esposito argued that the U.S. must review the way it approaches democracy and political Islam. Esposito, the founding director of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding (CMCU) at Georgetown University, said that the U.S. must first decide whether it believes in true self-determination or only in one narrow American version of democracy. Second, he said, the U.S. must reconsider whether democracy is best promoted through making headlines or through comparatively quiet diplomacy.

Prof. Anwar Ibrahim, a visiting professor and former deputy prime minister of Malaysia, agreed that America needed to rethink its approach to democratization. America to define precisely what it means by democracy, Ibrahim said – including free and fair elections, open media, the rule of law, and constitutional guarantees protecting individual rights – as a way to improve the concept's traction in the Muslim world.

Even openly discussing engagement with Islamists represents real progress, said Mona Yacoubian, a Special Advisor to the Muslim World Initiative at the United States Institute of Peace. In answering the question of whether Islamists who profess the desire to play by democratic rules are genuinely committed to democracy, Yacoubian said, we must note that many Islamists in the region say the right things. She highlighted in this regard the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's 2004 platform for democratic change.

On the other hand, Yacoubian said, there are four key factors which can help to ensure that political Islamists and all political actors become and remain enmeshed within a more democratic framework. First, institution-building and checks-and-balances, undergirded by strong institutional accountability would mitigate against Islamists abusing power. Second, the establishment of clear explicit or implicit red lines can serve as democratic restraints. In countries without red lines, Yacoubian noted, political openings are more likely to regress into authoritarianism. Third, she argued for the formation of secular-Islamist alliances for reform. This has happened in several countries, including Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, and Lebanon. Fourth, Yacoubian noted a need to open political space for moderate Islam. If Islamists have rivals and competition, she asserted, they will have greater incentives to moderate, citing the experience in Turkey.

These factors have important implications for U.S. policy, Yacoubian noted. She stressed the need for America to place greater emphasis on institution-building, to support more Islamist-

secular dialogue, to fight restrictions like the Emergency Laws in Egypt, and to identify and reach out to moderate Islamists. Yacoubian admitted that the U.S. has major credibility problems on democracy; she contrasted America's vocal defense of secular reformers who are jailed with its silence when Islamists are repressed.

Former Ambassador Edward Walker Jr. noted several of the obstacles that the State Department faces in promoting democracy and dealing with political Islamists in the Middle East. Typical policy agendas during his tenures included issues like military basing, getting funding for the first Gulf War, and ensuring that American soldiers were not prosecuted for crimes they committed in the region, said Walker. If he had gone into a meeting talking about human rights or democracy, Walker said, he would not have gotten anywhere with his main job. This doesn't mean that America shouldn't press Middle Eastern states on democracy, Walker argued, but only that it should focus on softer and less confrontational issues rather than the hardest ones.

Walker cited the example of a National Democratic Institute staffer who entered the country determined to build democracy by talking to the Muslim Brotherhood. After the staffer met with the Brotherhood, Walker said, the staffer was on the next plane out of the country. If he as an ambassador had opened up contacts with the Brotherhood, Walker said, he would have lost all access to President Mubarak, and thus made it necessary for Washington to replace him with a more acceptable ambassador. Despite these practical difficulties for American policy, Walker noted that political Islam commands an important constituency and that this constituency needs representation.

Both Yacoubian and Esposito noted the unique role that the Algerian civil war played in America's approach to political Islam. Algeria's initial opening was unparalleled, Yacoubian noted, but when the army intervened the moderates in the FIS were quickly discredited and the radicals took up arms. American policy was completely unprepared to respond to this scenario, Esposito said, and the fear of repeating the Algerian experience continues to color American perceptions of political Islam.

During the question-and-answer period with the audience, Dr. Tarik Yousef, an Assistant Professor of Economics and Shaykh Al-Sabah Chair in Arab Studies, suggested that there had been a golden period just after Sept. 11 for America to truly reassess its policies and embrace democratization and moderate political Islam. But considering the events since then, he asked, does this administration currently have the credibility and the goodwill to effectively send this message?

Mona Yacoubian answered that while undoubtedly scandals like Abu Ghraib create immense problems for the U.S., movements in policy are nevertheless important and can make a difference. Yacoubian also noted the small uptick in perceptions of America after the tsunami, which she argued indicated the potential for the U.S. to rehabilitate its image in the world's eyes. Prof. Ibrahim added that a diplomatic note from Secretary of State Madeleine Albright about democratization or human rights would anger the prime minister, but it would be taken very seriously. It means a lot to persuade Washington to send the right signals, he said.

The panel was co-sponsored by the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) and Georgetown University's Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding (CMCU). It was moderated by Rashad Mahmood, a M.A. in Arab Studies student and co-founder of The Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED).

“Democracy, Self-Interest, and Ideology: A Discussion of U.S. Policy Towards Political Islam” was the fourth event for POMED, an organization dedicated to examining the impact of U.S. policy on political reform and democratization in the Middle East.