



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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*The Project on Middle East Democracy and
the Middle East Program of the Woodrow Wilson Center*

Religious Freedom and Democratization in the Middle East: Links and Challenges

Woodrow Wilson Center, 1300 Pennsylvania Ave NW
February 22, 2008, 10:00 AM – 11:30 AM

The Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) and the Middle East Program of the Woodrow Wilson Center hosted a panel discussion on the relationship between religious freedom and democratization in the Middle East. The speakers discussed the abuses of religious rights in the region and addressed how the United States can best incorporate religion into its strategy for democracy promotion. Deputy Executive Director of Freedom House **Thomas Melia**, former Director of the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom **Thomas Farr**, and Deputy Director of the Middle East and North Africa Division at Human Rights Watch **Joe Stork** addressed these issues. The Wilson Center's Director of Middle East Program **Haleh Esfandiari** provided introductory remarks and POMED Executive Director **Andrew Albertson** moderated the event.

Thomas Melia began his remarks by pointing to Freedom House's Freedom in the World survey for this year, which indicated a general decline for democratic movements. He claimed that policy-makers needed to recognize the importance of religious freedom in democratization. According to Melia, the United States holds untapped credibility in this field. "Religious freedom in the United States is vibrant and fulsome."

Melia advocated greater dialogue with conservative Muslims, so that they can be convinced that democracy is compatible with their values. However, he admitted that many conservative Muslims would be worried that "too much freedom" would create a lewd, shallow society. "There is anxiety and fear among the Muslim world that democracy equates with social freedom that breaks down family values." These concerns, he stated, were similar to the concerns of conservative American citizens. Yet, the United States has not taken advantage of this shared idea of traditional values. "**Rather than try to persuade them to support a particular view of Islam, we should show how religion can thrive in a democracy.**"

Joe Stork drew the distinction between the freedom of belief and the freedom to express one's beliefs. He asserted that repressive governments restrict the latter by depriving their citizens of the right to free speech and the right to associate freely. However, these abuses are difficult to combat when the state incorporates religion as part of its policy. "The challenge is the politicization of religion."

While Stork supported the International Freedom Act of 1998, he believes that the United States has selectively exercised it. He provided the example of Saudi Arabia, a country that was not originally designated as a Country of Particular Concern, despite allegations of human rights abuses. “Part of the problem is the challenge of double standards.”

Stork denied that human rights problems were exacerbated by hasty elections. According to him, none of the countries in the region have undertaken elections too soon. Rather, authoritarian regimes were responsible for the manipulation and repression of religious rights. While recognizing that a place exists for Islamic democracy, he pointed out that different countries have varying interpretations of the Sharia law and consequently, different forms of governance. He advocated more tolerance on the part of the United States of Islamic-based law and encouraged the U.S. government to engage moderate Islamist parties like the Muslim Brotherhood.

Thomas Farr indicated that both secular and theological authoritarian regimes manipulate religious rights for instrumental reasons. Instead of merely combating moments of religious persecution, Farr suggested that the United States deal with the problem of intolerance and suppression of religious freedoms. He supported a greater understanding of the relationship between religion and state in order to prevent human rights abuses.

Farr emphasized that **the religious freedom deficit in the Middle East is not of interest to the United States for solely humanitarian reasons, but also for strategic purposes. Without establishing religious freedom, consolidating democracy in the Middle East would be impossible.** However, he acknowledged that the U.S. government has been reluctant to address the issue of religion in international diplomacy because of the risks involved. The Bush administration has not funded religious programs with the money allocated for democracy promotion, which Farr believed to be a grave error. “Ignorance is not a good basis of foreign policy in terms of religion.”

During the question and answer session, the panelists were asked about the proper policy towards religious freedom and democracy. Farr answered that we should spend money on “pragmatic approaches to religion.” Stork noted that the United States does not need to endorse all religious political parties, but rather engage them in dialogue. In his opinion, it would be foolish to ignore them as illegitimate because of their religious affiliation.