



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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National Endowment for Democracy

Promoting Democracy in the Arab World: New Ideas for U.S. Policy

1025 F. Street, N.W., Suite 800, 19 September, 2008, 12pm

The International Forum for Democratic Studies at NED hosted a presentation on ways in which the United States can encourage democracy in the Arab world. The panel featured **Atef Al-Saadawy**, Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellow at NED; **Larry Diamond**, Co-Director of the International Forum for Democratic Studies and Senior Fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution; and **Michele Dunne**, Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Atef Al-Saadawy began by discussing the impetus behind America's commitment to democracy promotion in the Middle East. He said 9/11 prompted a fundamental reevaluation of U.S. national security policy. **Following 9/11, the administration made democracy promotion a strategic goal of its foreign policy and a long-term solution for winning the war on terror.** A series of high-profile speeches and the creation of several Middle East development and aid organizations followed the shift in policy.

However, despite brief positive signs in 2004/2005, the new policy hasn't had a significant impact in the Arab world. **Atef noted that on every metric of political, social, and press freedom, the countries of MENA trail the rest of the world. He said a main cause of this is the monopoly of political power by the ruling elite and the repression of all opposition.** He said the secular and liberal parties are weak and divided, often speak in abstracts, and offer no distinctive ideologies or clear political programs. The Islamists provide many social services which increase their popular support, but many Arabs are concerned by their political platform. Atef noted that Arab rulers are very adept at suppressing secular opposition to keep Islamism as the only alternative to their rule.

Atef said that despite this forbidding landscape, a large majority of people in the region believe democracy is best form of government. **Therefore, the U.S. must continue to provide support for this clear indigenous demand.**

Atef then made several recommendations for U.S. policy. First, he said the U.S. must distinguish between regime change and democracy promotion. **He said the impression that democracy is linked to U.S. military force must be ended.** He noted that both the Arab and U.S. public show much stronger support for nonmilitary tools in the support of domestic democratic forces. Next, the U.S. must accept democratic outcomes. **He said the recent electoral popularity of Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood are due not to their innate strength, but to the weakness of secular and liberal forces.** He said the U.S. must support democratic and secular forces which will in turn diminish the power and appeal of illiberal alternatives. Atef noted that the most likely scenario in free elections is that Islamists will achieve a limited electoral victory

but not become a real threat to the regime. In this case the extremist parties will be forced to play by the democratic rules and will either moderate or lose popularity.

Atef then discussed the nature of U.S. foreign aid. He said the clear aim of foreign assistance should be to promote democracy, rather than to build up military or security capability. **He said that political and economic pressure should be reestablished as a basic tool to encourage democratic reform. The aid must be tied to democracy, human rights, and good governance conditionalities.** Finally, the U.S. should use its influence within the UN and other international organizations to exert pressure on undemocratic regimes.

Atef said our current government assistance programs are inadequately organized and funded, and skew highly toward military aid. He noted that most U.S. funds end up in the hands of the Arab governments, and don't ultimately benefit domestic NGOs or individuals. **He called for a significant increase in funding for programs explicitly promoting political reform.** Atef recommends creating a cabinet-level independent department that includes all U.S. government institutions that offer foreign aid. However, the majority of U.S. aid to the Arab world should be administered through NGOs, which would also be responsible for supervising its use in order to minimize corruption. He believes that semi-authoritarian states such as Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen should be the top priority, with programs tailored to each individual country's needs.

In conclusion, he said that the U.S. must repair its image abroad, and must regain credibility to effectively promote democracy. To do this, he suggests the U.S. play a positive role in resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict; close all foreign prisons including Guantanamo; and avoid the appearance of attempting to transplant American-style democracy to the Arab world.

Larry Diamond said our priority must be to press for expansion of the political landscape to allow opposition parties the chance to grow constituencies. He warned against prematurely pressing for elections. He said we must first help to unfreeze the political system to avoid distorted electoral outcomes. He also noted the need to encourage Islamic parties to play the political game, in the hope that routinization of practice will moderate them in time. Diamond also agreed that the U.S. needs to apply political and economic leverage to its Arab allies, and tie aid to very specific reforms that encourage political openings.

Michele Dunne discussed the practical problems with implementing Atef's recommendations. She agreed on the importance of first expanding political space, but noted that it is very difficult to achieve. **She said that the U.S. would have more chance of success if it applied pressure in private, rather than with ostentatious mandates from Congress.** She noted that such public demands only engender a hostile reaction borne of national pride. Dunne also agreed that too much aid cannot go to the Arab regimes at the expense of the people, but noted that many reforms, such as judicial and education, can only be accomplished by governments. **She concluded by saying that our assistance programs are useless unless they are matched by amenable policies of the Arab regimes.** If assistance capacity is frustrated by repressive government policies toward NGOs, no progress will ever be achieved.