



# PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

www.pomed.org ♦ P.O. Box 25533 ♦ Washington, DC 20027-8533

---

Project on Middle East Democracy and the Institute for Middle East Studies  
**“A Time of Transition: U.S. Impact on Reform in a Changing Middle East”**  
Elliott Room 310, Marvin Center, 800 21<sup>st</sup> St NW, 22 September 2008, 2pm

The Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) and the Institute for Middle East Studies at George Washington University’s Elliott School hosted a discussion featuring **Saad Eddin Ibrahim**, leading Egyptian dissident and founder of the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies in Cairo; and **Marc Lynch**, Associate Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at GWU. The discussion was moderated by **Andrew Albertson**, Executive Director of POMED, and focused on how the changing dynamics of reform in the region affect efforts at democracy promotion and U.S. policy.

Saad Eddin Ibrahim began by discussing why the U.S. should care about events and policy in the Middle East. He said the region, with 6% of the world population, is responsible for 40% of world’s armed violence in the last fifty years. In that period the U.S. has been involved in armed intervention ten times in the region. He said that even beyond the innumerable geopolitical considerations, the Middle East matters because Americans fight and die there. Saad then noted the very low U.S. approval rating in the region. He said this was not always the case historically, and mentioned some high points of U.S. diplomacy, including Wilson’s call to self-determination, U.S. support for the peace process, and its consistent example as a beacon of progress, freedom, and opportunity.

**He said people in the region believe democracy must come from within; and while it cannot be exported or imported, it can be supported. As models for U.S. policy, he cited the Marshall Plan and the 1975 Helsinki Accord.** Saad stressed that aid conditionality does work, and is desperately needed. He said the U.S. should not merely provide regimes with guns and tanks, or support for friendly tyrants. **Conditionality will allow the U.S. to act in accord with its traditions and ideals, and to reclaim the moral high ground lost in the last eight years.** Saad noted that the people of the region are eager to join in the recent worldwide wave of democratization. **He said there is no cultural or religious explanation for the dearth of democracy; the people of the region deserve self-rule, and the U.S. must help by imposing Helsinki-like conditions on its aid.**

**Marc Lynch** agreed that despite low approval, only the U.S. has sufficient power and influence to facilitate democratic change in the region. In the wake of Islamist electoral successes in Egypt and Palestine, Lynch noted the major flaw in the U.S. approach under the Freedom Agenda. **The U.S. goal was not to change the fundamentals of power in the region, but to use democratic instruments to stabilize and legitimize the regimes of our allies, and use the same instruments to undermine the regimes of our enemies.**

He noted that the result is our allies are now less democratic and less legitimate than ever. **Lynch said there is no conflict between U.S. values and interests. He stressed that democracy promotion is a U.S. national interest. It is untenable for the U.S. to align itself with deeply unpopular governments that repress human rights, civil society, and political participation.** He said that anti-Americanism is fueled most by feelings of American hypocrisy; the gap between U.S. rhetoric and action, the uneven application of its values, and the friends it chooses to keep in the region.

Lynch then made recommendations for U.S. policy. He said the U.S. should make no more empty grand pronouncements on democracy. There is already a deep consensus in favor of democracy in the region. Arabs do not need to be sold, they need concrete U.S. action to bring it about. **Lynch said the U.S. should focus on the expansion of “bill of rights” freedoms, including speech, assembly, human rights, judicial independence, and rule of law. We must first create a level playing field to strengthen opposition forces. He agreed with Saad that conditionality of aid is the way to bring this about. Lynch called for nonpartisan guidelines and benchmarks and standards of compliance. There must be a built-in, mandatory trigger mechanism for cuts in aid that are beyond the reach of prevailing political considerations.**

Saad noted that since the recent U.S. retreat from democracy promotion, the people have taken matters into their own hands. **He noted that in Egypt, instances of civil disobedience are skyrocketing as people take their grievances to the street in the form of strikes, protests, and food riots.** Saad then discussed the specter of Islamists coming to power. He noted that there has never been a case of Islamists coming to power through democratic elections and then reneging on the rules of the game afterward. He also said Islamists’ electoral support is overstated. In the strong showing by the Muslim Brotherhood in the Egyptian parliamentary elections in 2005, nationwide turnout was only 23%. Saad believes the other 77% stayed home because they were not satisfied with the choice between the ruling party and the Islamists. **He said that the examples of Turkey and Morocco show that Islamists can behave responsibly, and fear of their political participation should not paralyze U.S. foreign policy.**

**In response to an audience question, both Lynch and Saad agreed that issues of economic justice are paramount in the region. They noted that the growing gap between rich and poor, rising inflation, and government unaccountability feed into deep public resentment.**

In response to question on the impact of the Israel-Palestine conflict, Lynch stressed that we cannot be willing to wait on democracy until we solve intractable problems in Palestine. Both issues must be pursued separately on their own merits. **Saad agreed, and noted that regional dictators who have never liberated anything or anyone use the Palestinian issue as a pretext for staying in power.**

Lynch concluded by noting how U.S. interests are served by promoting democracy. He said recent efforts have exposed extremists and radicals as being so far outside of the mainstream. **In promoting democracy, we promote a vision of the future that is broadly attractive to the people in the region.**