



# PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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The Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES)

## **RELIGION AND STATE: A MIDDLE EAST, U.S. AND EU 'TRIALOGUE'**

1319 18th Street, NW, 6 October, 2008, 12pm

POMED and FES hosted a panel discussion featuring **Geneive Abdo**, Fellow at the Century Foundation; **Ibrahim Houdaiby**, Board member of Ikhwanweb.com, Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt; **Bob Edgar**, President of Common Cause and former General Secretary of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA; and **Dietmar Nietan**, Foreign Policy Advisor to Martin Schulz (MEP), and Chairman of the Social Democratic Parliamentary Group in the European Parliament. The discussion was moderated by **Andrew Albertson**, Executive Director of POMED.

**Geneive Abdo** began by discussing the revival of religious identity in the U.S. and in the Middle East. She said the causes of each are profoundly different and relate to each society's idea of the relationship between religion and state. **She noted the permanent tension in Islamic societies between the authority of the state and that of the religious clerisy.** In the West, particularly the U.S., there has always been a relative absence of Islamic religious authority, and as a result Muslim communities have defined their relationship to the state much differently. **She said that western imams must walk a delicate balance in which they maintain credibility with the larger umma while also recognizing the supremacy of state authority.** Abdo raised the question of how neutral the state should be in matters of religion. She noted that the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt seeks to alter the neutrality of the state by appealing to sharia law to inform public policy.

Abdo then discussed the post-9/11 fusion of the American perception of Muslims living both here and abroad. This has engendered a dramatic reaction among American Muslims: **they began to both separate themselves from extremism as well as act as ambassadors of Islam.** **She noted that since 9/11, Muslims in the U.S. have become much more involved in politics and policy debates.** She said the problem is that most of those Muslims currently engaged in political advocacy are not well-equipped or well-trained enough to inform and lead U.S. policy debates. Abdo discussed the proliferation of Muslim student organizations on college campuses as a result of the intensification of Muslim identity. She noted concern that such groups are creating a culture and a society completely apart from those of their peers. Abdo also said that in addition to stressing commonalities between faiths, there are fundamental differences that must be discussed and addressed publicly.

**Ibrahim Houdaiby** said that there was a time when one could separate the state from private life. But now the state is so large and has become too integrated into the fabric of private life to speak any longer of a stark separation. **He said all political ideologies draw from some value system, and therefore even a non-religious value system acts in the same way as a religious**

**one.** Houdaiby relativized all competing value systems, and wondered which is best to govern human societies. He said in the West it is the market that has asserted its values in society, expanding beyond its original sphere into defining universal human values.

**He said that a civil state is desired in which political and religious institutions are separate while sharing the same value system. However, he believes the absolute secularization of values is not desirable. He said that the three major monotheisms all share basic human values that should govern societies.** They differ on particular points of legislation but not on the underlying values. He said such values should be the pillars upon which state laws and constitutions are built. **He believes that a society governed by absolute secularism necessarily loses certain human values that only a religious framework can provide.**

**Dietmar Nietan** began by noting that there is no monolithic European perspective on matters of religion and state. **However, all European nations share the common difficulty of integrating their Muslim populations. He said that Europe contains many internal fault lines between modernization and traditional Islamic values. Nietan stressed the need for dialogue with religious groups, particularly as relates to the Israel-Palestine conflict.** He said we must work to integrate Hamas and Hezbollah. He listed Britain's experience with the IRA as proof that talking with religiously-motivated actors can be successful. He said it is always possible to split the militants from those who are willing and able to talk, and this should be pursued wherever possible.

**Bob Edgar** said that he believes strongly in the separation of church and state, but not in the separation of people of faith from government institutions. **He noted that the U.S. Founders never intended to build a Christian nation, and a pluralistic society requires respecting religious traditions as well as those with no religion.** Edgar said he is concerned with the waning Christian population in the Middle East, as well as the ignorance of the differences between Muslim sects among the American population. He said we must teach each other about other faiths and traditions, and noted that the religious right does not represent the historical tradition of Christianity in America. He said that many problems in the Middle East stem from U.S. arrogance in thinking that it is right and everyone else is wrong.

Dietmar Nietan noted that we should not use religious appeals in arguing for public policies, and secular arguments are sufficient. **In response to Ibrahim Houdaiby, he said that the basic source of human values come from individuals, and therefore we must accept and defend individual rights as against community traditions and religious values.** He said such individual rights are not reserved only for the West.

Ibrahim Houdaiby discussed the mission of the Muslim Brotherhood, and addressed the issue of apostasy and heresy in Islam. He quoted the Koranic Surah, "Let there be no compulsion in religion." He admitted that this has not been the historical interpretation, but said there are some clerics who allow for apostasy and heresy. He then said that such topics are debatable, and are at heart not religious but social issues. **He said there is much debate within the MB in light of the recent release of its political platform.** He concluded by noting that the Brotherhood seeks a moderate stance between secularism and the adoption of an absolutist Islamic program.